

Of Beauty

"It's unfair," Takeshi Fukuda complained as he pulled a piece of grilled chicken off the skewer with his front teeth. It was eight in the evening. The *izakaya*¹ near the station was teeming with white and pinstriped short-sleeved shirts.

The air conditioning was supposed to be on, but the restaurant was so dense with people that it felt like the humid heat from daytime, which had peaked to an all-year high, had dragged on into evening. Sweat coated the brows of people there, and alcohol flowed freely.

The restaurant's interior was barren, as if to reflect the owner's equal lack of friendliness. It clearly lacked the ambiance for a date, for none of the men there were accompanied by women. Apart from them, one could only spot the odd university student here and there.

Fukuda clicked his tongue in front of Yosuke Matsuoka's face, and waved his bare skewer back and forth like a conductor waving his baton. A Gucci watch bobbed at the mouth of his suit sleeve.

"Just the sight of that guy stresses me out, and he has no idea about it. I feel like it's unfair, you know, when I'm the only one who feels irritated."

The dew had accumulated on Matsuoka's highball glass. He brought it to his lips, and drained it down to the last drop of melted ice. His phone had rung right before seven in the evening, as he was on his way home from making sales visits. It was his co-worker, Fukuda, inviting him out for a drink this evening.

"Sure, I can go," Matsuoka had answered lightly. There was no soccer game to watch tonight, and it would be better than eating alone. He had no idea Fukuda would seize the chance to go on such a wearisome tirade.

"When I got promoted to chief of General Affairs, you know what this guy says? 'Congratulations' with a smile on his face. I'm being promoted and I'm *younger* than him. Position-wise, he's the one going to be assisting *me*. At least I'd know he has some pride if he was a little pissed off. But smiling like that? Does this guy even care about his job?"

"Yeah, totally. I know what you mean," Matsuoka agreed. "You get people like that sometimes. Oh, excuse me! Can I have a lemon *chuhai*?"² Matsuoka gave an order to a server passing the counter, then turned back to face Fukuda.

"Don't let it get to you so much. It's what happens the earlier you get promoted: you end up with more incompetent older subordinates to deal with."

"You know, you just might've hit a philosophical point," Fukuda murmured in all seriousness.

Matsuoka laughed. "With those sidekick-types, you just have to ignore them. It's called natural selection. Incompetent guys are just meant to be weeded out. That's how society works." He grinned at Fukuda.

"Yeah, I guess," Fukuda said, shrugging. He was a man steadily being promoted through the ranks to become chief of General Affairs at twenty-eight. His clumsy older subordinate by comparison

1 Japanese-style pub.

2 A "shochu highball": a mixed alcoholic drink, made with a distilled liquor called *shochu* and soda, flavoured with some kind of fruit.

seemed to irritate him to no end.

"Don't you find it hard to deal with guys when they have, like, a half-decent personality?" Fukuda asked.

"Are you talking about your assistant? If he's a good guy, what's the problem?"

Fukuda made a show of sighing in exasperation.

"You don't get it, do you? Personality doesn't matter at work. A guy can be a total ass, but I won't complain if he gets all of his work done properly. What's important is whether he can pull his weight. We go to work to work, not to make friends, you know what I mean?"

Fukuda's pedantic tone made Matsuoka bristle. *Why the hell do I have to be lectured by you?* he thought. But Fukuda didn't stop there.

"You're so lucky, you know," he went so far as to mutter. "At least you people in Sales get to step outside. Not like us General Affairs, where we're chained to our desks all day. No one would be able to tell if you guys slacked off a bit. And you guys get to step out and refresh yourselves."

"Yeah, I guess," Matsuoka agreed amiably, but inwardly, he was seething. *Refresh myself? Are you kidding me? I wish I could show you the gruelling journey that we take every month to meet our quota.* They had to walk endlessly from one business partner to the next until their legs were stiff. Skipping lunch breaks was the norm. Even after all that work, sometimes they were unable to garner a single new contract. The frustration was indescribable. They waged regular battles with seniors who commanded them to do the impossible. If you were barely making your quota, by the end of the month your business smile was plastered to your face, and medication was an absolute necessity for your stomach, which churned with the stress of it all. Some people even vomited blood and collapsed.

"Besides, you're good-looking. If the company representative's a girl, I'm sure you have no problem snatching up those contracts, right?"

I'd be living the high life if I could get contracts with my looks, Matsuoka thought bitterly. But he grinned nevertheless.

"Well, let's just say I make full use of my arsenal. Wow, will you look at the time! I'm sorry, but I have to get going soon."

"What? It's still nine," Fukuda said, pouting in dissatisfaction.

"My girlfriend called me before I got here," Matsuoka explained. "She said she'd come over to my house once she's finished with her co-worker's farewell party. I'm really sorry."

Matsuoka ushered a reluctant Fukuda along and exited the restaurant. Outside, the humid heat of the summer night clung to their skin.

"I dunno if it's because we're the same age, but I feel really comfortable talking to you," Fukuda admitted.

It was a flattering way to say it, but in reality he probably had no one else in General Affairs that he could complain to—Matsuoka made the calm analysis despite his light alcoholic buzz.

"You're a pretty good listener, you know."

Good listening was a technique Matsuoka had honed in his sales career. The rule of thumb was to respond consistently. There was also a trick to how to give those responses: you never disagreed. You nodded and agreed to his opinions, no matter how absurd they were. That way, the speaker would begin to think, *'Oh, he understands me. He knows how I feel.'*

"We should go drinking again," Fukuda said.

They parted at the stairs of the subway station. Matsuoka and Fukuda each entered platforms for trains bound in opposite directions. The moment Matsuoka was left by himself, the exhaustion came down like a lead weight on his shoulders. *If I knew I had to put up with his complaining, I should have gone drinking by myself*, he thought in regret.

Venting felt good for the person who was venting, but in turn, accumulated in the listener. Those emotions hardly led to anything positive, and it was clear they were anything but beneficial to mental health.

"Ugh, I'm exhausted."

Matsuoka dismissed the griping colleague from his mind. Forget that; tomorrow was Friday, the day he'd been anticipating. *What should I wear? What kind of makeup should I put on?* Just the thought of it filled Matsuoka with excitement. He ducked his head and grinned to himself.

Matsuoka's favourite part about putting on makeup was choosing the colour of his lipstick. From every colour of the rainbow, he picked one out depending on his mood that day. If he wanted to play the sexy woman, he picked a shade of red. If he wanted to go for the modest look of a well-bred woman, he picked a shade of pink. Today, he felt like being a woman who'd done her share of fooling around, so he picked a deep shade of red.

He filled in his lips over the neat coat of foundation on his face, being careful to draw them in smaller than the actual line of his lips. Putting on makeup was similar to painting a picture. It was important to maintain a good overall balance.

His lips, vivid like freshly-picked cherries, moved in the mirror. He gazed intently at his reflection, drawing close to the mirror, then distancing himself to inspect his job. Matsuoka smiled. It was perfect. He looked much, much more beautiful and cuter than the girls at his workplace.

Once his makeup was in place, Matsuoka shed his clothes and dug out a bra from the back of his closet. He padded it and put it on. He slid his arms through the sleeves of a patterned shirt, and wore a black skirt with dark stockings. A long wig with tresses tumbling down to his chest completed the look. Imagining himself as a slightly flashy office worker on her way home from work, he posed in the mirror with a purse in hand. He was absolutely dreamy, if he could say so himself. From the top of his head to the tips of his toes, he was a perfect woman from every angle. Matsuoka spritzed himself lightly with perfume as a finishing touch, then walked out the door.

The passersby turned to stare. He'd been picked up on more than a couple occasions. These facts lent him even more confidence.

It was a year ago when Matsuoka had started dressing in drag. At the time, things were hectic at work, and he ended up coming home late for many days on end. Unable to put up with it anymore, his girlfriend of three years walked out on him. They had practically moved in together by then, so when his girlfriend left, Matsuoka felt like she had left a gaping hole in his heart.

After a time, when his loneliness no longer bothered him, Matsuoka used his day off work to tidy up the things his girlfriend had left behind. Inside the bags she had told him to throw away were heaps of old clothes and cosmetics. Fond memories made him pick them up, and as he gazed at them,

he was suddenly struck by a thought—*hey, I think I'd fit into this*. When he tried it on, it was a little tight around the waist, but not unwearable.

The simple sleeveless black dress looked much better on him than he'd imagined. This surprised Matsuoka. Just for fun, he put on a little lipstick. This, too, suited his pale complexion well, and he looked like a doll. It was almost funny that he looked so good, so he tried out some foundation and mascara while he was at it. When he finished, he was left with a self he could barely recognize. One would be hard-pressed to find a woman who looked as beautiful as Yosuke Matsuoka did now.

Matsuoka was so quickly and so fiercely sucked into this alternate world and his beautiful self that he even surprised himself. He bought clothes, lingerie, and cosmetics over the Internet, and referred to magazines to figure out makeup tricks. Unfortunately, his job in sales did not allow him to grow out his hair, so he got a wig for that. When Matsuoka stepped into his role as a woman, he played it from head to toe, and he forgot all about his everyday self. It was exhilarating transforming into the kind of beauty that turned heads, and it was good stress relief.

Matsuoka was aware that his hobby was not exactly normal, so he decided his "drag day" would only be on Fridays. Limiting his dressing up to once a week simply heightened the desire he felt for it as well as the pleasure he derived from it.

On Friday nights, Matsuoka carefully and meticulously groomed himself to become a woman. At first, he only used to walk around the house, but gradually he began to want to go outside. His desire mounted so much it was irrepressible; one day, he finally ended up stepping out of the house.

Everyone turned their heads as he walked down the street. He found the attention pleasantly dizzying. He basked in the feeling of superiority at being more beautiful than an actual woman, and inwardly laughed with contempt at the cocky stares of the men around him.

On the sparsely-populated train bound for the city, Matsuoka was filled with excitement just imagining how many men would try to strike up conversation with him tonight.

—Now it had started to rain. Matsuoka was curled up in a corner of an alley in the outskirts of the shopping district, vomiting copiously from the overwhelming nausea he couldn't hold back. The smell of his own vomit triggered his nausea, making him vomit again. His stomach felt a little more settled after he had emptied it, and he staggered a few steps forward. He had barely walked a couple dozen metres before he felt ill again and had to squat on the ground.

He'd been repeating this routine for quite some time now. His brand-new shirt and black skirt were dirty, and his perfectly-finished makeup was now a mess from his tears. He felt horrible; his mood was worse than what worst could describe. Immediately after arriving in the shopping district, Matsuoka had been approached by a man in his forties. He would have ignored this man like any other, but today, Matsuoka had smiled and gone along with him. He had seen this man before at one of the companies during his sales visits. This company representative in particular always tried to take advantage of Matsuoka's weaknesses, but was unusually yielding to this man. This bothered Matsuoka.

"Who is that guy?" he asked a close co-worker later.

"The sales manager of Takeshima Products," his co-worker had told him.

Matsuoka was eager, to say the least, at any chance to network with Takashima Products. He had visited a number of times to pitch a sale at them, only to be turned away at the doorstep. Although he knew he couldn't talk about work while he was dressed in drag, he had an ulterior motive anyway: if he could find out the man's hobbies and preferences, Matsuoka figured it would become a useful entry point into garnering a new client.

Matsuoka was taken by the man to a cocktail bar on the top floor of a luxury hotel. Matsuoka drank whatever that was offered to him and made harmless small talk with the man.

"You've got a pretty low, husky voice."

The man's comment made Matsuoka's heart stop for a moment, but he managed to smooth it over by saying he was catching a cold. No matter how perfect he was in appearance, there was nothing he could do about his voice. His anxiety at the possibility of being discovered made Matsuoka say less and less, and to fill the awkward air between them, he drank nonstop. Since he only usually drank beer or *chuhai*, it didn't take long for him to get sick from drinking unfamiliar cocktails.

"Aghhhh!"

He was woken by a man's yelling. Once he came to, Matsuoka realized he was in a hotel room, lying on a twin-sized bed. Feeling more room around his crotch area than usual, he looked down to see that his skirt had been hiked up and his lace boy shorts had been pulled down to his thighs.

"Y—You're a man?!"

Matsuoka felt all the blood in his body rush to his feet. He hastily pulled up his boy shorts and got off the bed. His feet were unsteady from intoxication, and his knees buckled as he crumpled to the floor.

"You tricked me, you disgusting pervert!"

The man lunged at him, red in the face. He straddled Matsuoka, grabbed him by the front of his shirt and slapped him across the face. The man yanked his hair, making his wig come off. When he paused in astonishment, Matsuoka took the chance to shove him off.

He picked the wig off the floor and tore out of the room. He fell twice on his way to the elevator. His shoulders rose and fell as he gained his breath, relieved that he had not been followed. Just then, a middle-aged woman who had stepped into the elevator with him saw the long wig that Matsuoka was holding and gave him an appalled look. Matsuoka put the wig back on on the spot, but since he didn't have a mirror, he wasn't sure if he'd been able to put it on properly.

He exited the hotel and walked the best he could with staggering steps. He started feeling ill partway through, squatted, and vomited several times. A shudder went down his spine every time he recalled the man hitting him. He knew what he was doing wasn't normal. But he had never thought he would be put through such misery, that he would be subjected to violence. *I want to get home as soon as possible to take these clothes off. I'll never dress in drag again for the rest of my life*, he thought.

He had forgotten his heels and his purse, which contained his wallet, at the hotel. Thankfully, he had left his apartment key in the mailbox, which used a combination lock, so he would have no problem entering his apartment. But without cash, he would not be able to take the taxi home. The last train had already gone. He would have asked a friend to bring cash, but today of all days, he had forgotten his cell phone at home. *Even before that*, Matsuoka smiled bitterly, *would I have the courage to see a friend looking like this?* He would rather have died if he was going to be condemned and called a

pervert as he had with that man.

No one approached him as he sat curled up in the alley. Back when he was striding jauntily down the street, some men had even come running to catch up to him. But in the end, he was just a fake—reality came as a blow.

He felt the presence of a group passing by in front of him. Hearing a familiar voice among them, Matsuoka looked up reflexively. It was a group of seven or eight men and women, and Fukuda was at the centre. Perhaps they had gone drinking on the way home from work; Fukuda was wearing a short-sleeved shirt and a navy blue tie. He glanced at Matsuoka for a moment, then shifted his gaze away. They passed Matsuoka completely.

Although he would have been dismayed if he was recognized, Matsuoka also felt a little hurt that he had been ignored. But he couldn't bring himself to blame Fukuda. If Matsuoka had been placed in the same situation and had spotted a drunk woman squatting on the ground, he felt like he would have ignored her instead of approaching her.

It's a good thing you were ignored, he told himself. Had he been approached and recognized, he would have been met with scorn. Even worse, if Fukuda went on to tell other co-workers of his age, rumours would start circulating at the office. Although Matsuoka sometimes went for drinks with Fukuda and was relatively close to him compared to other people at work, he still didn't trust the man wholeheartedly.

After a while, the rain suddenly lessened to a drizzle. Matsuoka heard the rapping of raindrops hitting an umbrella. He looked up to see a man holding an umbrella over him. He looked about thirty-four or thirty-five, with an uninteresting haircut and a generally unfashionable look; his tie was coming loose and hanging to the right. He looked familiar—perhaps he had been with Fukuda earlier.

"Are you alright?"

I'm alright, Matsuoka was about to reply, then thought better of it. If revealed through his voice that he was a man, he would be treated with contempt again. Matsuoka nodded silently instead.

"I saw you earlier, and, um... would you like me to take you to your house?"

Matsuoka nodded enthusiastically at the unbelievable offer. The man offered his right hand, and Matsuoka took it. It was warm, yet at the same time, he had his own suspicions. Perhaps this man was planning to take a drunk woman home and have his way with her.

"What happened to your shoes?"

The man was quick to notice Matsuoka's bare feet. Matsuoka had forgotten his shoes at the hotel but couldn't go back to get them—but he could never say that. So he simply shook his head. The man took his own shoes off on the spot.

"It might look dorky and you probably won't like it, but at least it's better than stepping on something and hurting yourself. I'm wearing socks, so... please."

Matsuoka shook his head in a panic and declined, but the man refused to put his shoes back on. After a long moment of deliberation, Matsuoka accepted the man's goodwill and put the shoes on. They nestled close together under the small umbrella and Matsuoka clomped along in shoes that were too large for his feet. He never lifted his face once throughout.

When they reached the taxi stand, Matsuoka was faced with a predicament. He had no money

to take a taxi. No matter how much the man insisted, "Please, get on," Matsuoka couldn't bring himself to. Finally, a customer complained from behind them.

"If you're not going to get on, can you get out of the way?"

They shuffled off to the side.

"You don't want to go home?" the man asked him with a concerned expression. Matsuoka shook his head.

"You haven't said a word up 'til now..."

Matsuoka took the man's hand. The clear plastic umbrella fell to the asphalt. On the man's open palm, he slowly wrote each letter out.

'I can't talk.'

The man looked at Matsuoka in surprise.

'I don't have money to ride the taxi.'

The man picked up the fallen umbrella and took Matsuoka's right hand. He went to the very end of the taxi line.

"Can you write down the general area where your house is?"

Matsuoka was offered a notebook and ballpoint pen, where he wrote his address down. When their turn came, the man made Matsuoka climb into the taxi, and passed the memo to the driver.

"How much would it cost to go here?"

"About 5,000, I think," murmured the driver. The man took out his wallet and handed the contents—all of six thousand yen and some change—to Matsuoka.

"She can't talk," the man said to the driver. "If there's something you need to tell her, please write it down on paper," Then, he turned to Matsuoka and smiled.

"I'm going in the opposite direction. Be careful on your way home."

The man backed away from the taxi. Matsuoka wanted to say thanks, but couldn't talk; the door shut on him before he could write it on the man's hand. The car lurched into motion. Matsuoka clutched the money in his hand tightly and continued to gaze at the man's figure getting smaller and smaller into the distance.

On Monday, Matsuoka forcibly made time in his schedule to come back to the office from his rounds at lunch. He visited the General Affairs department, aiming to arrive the closest he could get to the end of lunch break, when any workers who had gone out for lunch would be back in the office.

"Hey, what's up?" Fukuda was quick to notice him.

"I'm running an errand for the section chief," Matsuoka lied as he took a sweeping glance of the room, looking for the man from Friday. Since he had been with Fukuda, it was very likely he was from the General Affairs department as well. —*Found him*. There he was. At the desk at the furthest end of the room was the man who had lent him fare for the taxi.

"Who's that sitting at the desk in the far end?" Matsuoka asked.

Fukuda peered in the direction that Matsuoka pointed. "Oh, him? What do you want with him?" he said, his tone suddenly careless. The change in attitude bothered Matsuoka.

"Nothing in particular, really, it's just..."

Fukuda pulled at Matsuoka's suit and drew him closer.

"That's him," he whispered in Matsuoka's ear. Matsuoka pieced it together from the man's general vibe. He was probably the older subordinate that Fukuda had been endlessly griping to him about.

"That guy's him?"

Fukuda wrinkled his brow and nodded vehemently.

"Yeah. He's called Hirosue. Just the sight of him pisses me off, so I moved him to a desk at the very end of the room."

One o'clock came and went as they chatted. The afternoon portion of the work day began. Hirosue suddenly got out of his seat and came this way. A cold sweat broke out on Matsuoka's forehead. He wondered if Hirosue had recognized him as the woman from Friday, but Hirosue gave not so much as a glance to Matsuoka as he stood before Fukuda.

"I finished preparing the materials you told me about."

Fukuda snatched them from him. "Didn't I tell you to hand them in first thing this morning?"

"I'm sorry," Hirosue apologized, even lowering his head in a bow.

"This isn't the first time, is it? It's a problem, you know, when you can't keep your deadlines. If you can't finish something in the time frame I give you, can you at least let me know beforehand? I have issues to work out on my end as well, you know."

"I'm sorry."

"You don't have to apologize. But if I've pointed out a mistake to you once, don't ever repeat it again. Please."

Without making a single excuse, Hirosue only bowed his head apologetically before returning to his desk. It was painful, to say the least, to watch him endure one-sided abuse.

"I know he's your subordinate and everything, but he's older than you. Don't you think you're being a bit harsh?" Matsuoka warned in a whisper, but Fukuda appeared unfazed.

"This is just the right amount of strictness. He's always got his head in the clouds, so anything I say takes a while 'til it gets to his brain, you know," he said, clearly not open to second opinions.

Since he couldn't stay and chat in General Affairs forever, Matsuoka returned to Sales and went out again. He visited and checked up with important clients, and rushed through preparing pamphlets to take to a new business partner. It hadn't yet struck six in the evening when he returned to the office.

Matsuoka figured it would be unnatural for him to show up in General Affairs so many times. He instead bet on the guess that Hirosue was still in the office at this hour, and sat by the hedges of the building next door to the office and pretended to text someone on his cell phone while he waited for Hirosue to come out.

Past seven in the evening, Hirosue came out of the main entrance of the office by himself. He walked in the opposite direction from where Matsuoka was sitting. Matsuoka followed a distance behind, being careful not to be noticed. It made him feel like a detective, which was a little exciting.

Hirosue got off the train after a fifteen-minute ride on a line that ran in the opposite direction of where Matsuoka lived. He then walked about five minutes from the station to the third storey of a four-storey apartment building, and entered room 306. Matsuoka hadn't needed to find out where

Hirosue lived, but he'd gotten carried away and ended up tailing him the whole way home.

On the train ride back to his own place, one thought occupied Matsuoka's mind and refused to budge: how had Hirosue had gone home that night, having given Matsuoka all the bills he had in his wallet, and with no trains running to take him home?

Matsuoka mulled considerably over whether he should meet with Hirosue again dressed in drag, or just as himself. If he were to see Hirosue as himself, he didn't want to say that he'd been dressed in drag, which meant he would have to fabricate a persona for his drag self. He wondered if he should lie and say he had a little sister, but his lie would be exposed instantly if Hirosue were to talk to Fukuda about him. Fukuda knew that Matsuoka only had a little brother.

After thinking long and hard, Matsuoka decided to see the man in drag again. He would arrange to "bump into him again" at the station, and would return the money and shoes. Since he had already told Hirosue he couldn't talk, he figured the man wouldn't try to pry into his personal life all that much.

The next day, Matsuoka took a room in a business hotel near the office. He left a bag containing women's clothes and cosmetics with the front desk before he went to work. When his work finished, he ran straight into the hotel, got changed, and put makeup on. He wore a navy scarf around his neck to hide his Adam's apple. Today, he went for the modest, well-bred-woman look. His summery white suit made him look like a fresh, youthful beauty.

Matsuoka went out, perfectly co-ordinated from head to toe. On the side of the platform where Hirosue boarded the train, he waited for the man to appear.

Yesterday he had appeared around seven. Today, there was no sign of him, and it was already past eight. Perhaps he had gone for drinks on his way home from work—just as Matsuoka considered giving up and going home, the man finally showed himself.

The man came down the stairs just as the train glided into the station, and he made to board from the nearest door. Matsuoka hurried over to grab his arm to stop him from getting on.

"Yes?" Hirosue turned around and tilted his head curiously. His hair was a little overgrown, his figure was wiry, and he had a small face. His eyes were not very large, and he had thin lips. Despite having looks that weren't bad to begin with, he still managed to look incredibly tacky. He was the picture of a man who was unconcerned about his appearance.

"Um... can I help you?"

Matsuoka was astonished that Hirosue didn't instantly recognize him as the woman in the rain from the other day. He hastily took out a pen and memo pad from his purse and scribbled a note.

'Thank you very much for Friday.'

The man read the memo and took a second look at Matsuoka's face.

"Oh, you're from that time."

When Matsuoka flashed a smile at him, the man blushed sheepishly and looked at his feet.

"Were your feet alright?"

At first, Matsuoka had no idea what he meant; but he soon realized Hirosue was talking about him being barefoot.

'They were fine. Thank you. How did you get home after that?' he wrote in the next note.

The man peered into the pad in Matsuoka's hands and smiled wryly.

"I tried phoning my friends, but I couldn't get a hold of any of them. There was nothing I could do, so I walked home."

It took at least twenty minutes by train from Hirosue's house to the shopping district. On foot, it would probably have taken at least one or two hours.

'How long did it take you to get home?' Matsuoka wrote. There was a slight pause before the man answered.

"Don't worry about it. Not more than thirty minutes."

Matsuoka knew it was a lie, but at the same time, it stirred his heart. To Hirosue, he was an unknown woman, a total stranger. Yet Hirosue not only had the good heart to lend his shoes and money to him, but was also kind enough to tell this small lie so he wouldn't make Matsuoka feel bad. Matsuoka was touched. This was what it meant to be someone with a big heart, he thought.

"Are you on your way home from work?" Hirosue asked. Matsuoka nodded silently.

'I usually don't stop at this station, but I happened to be around here for work. I'm glad I was able to see you again. Um, will you be at this station tomorrow?' Matsuoka wrote on paper.

"Yes," Hirosue answered. "If I take this line, I don't have to take any transfers to get home from the office."

'If I come here tomorrow around this time, would I be able to see you? I want to return your shoes and money.'

The man shook his head hurriedly.

"Oh, no, please throw those shoes away. They're cheap ones, anyway. You don't have to worry about the money, either. Really. Also, I go home at different times every day, so I can't guarantee to meet you at a certain time."

'I'll be waiting,' Matsuoka wrote on the memo pad, and smiled at him. Hirosue uncomfortably avoided his gaze. Matsuoka squeezed the man's hands tightly, and without waiting for an answer, left the station as if to flee it.

The next day, Matusoka had some time before their scheduled meeting at eight, so he went back to his apartment once after work, changed, then went back out.

As he made his way down the station stairs fifteen minutes before their meeting time, Matsuoka spotted Hirosue sitting on a bench in front of the platform. The sight made Matsuoka finally realize his mistake.

Yesterday, Hirosue had said he didn't know what time his work would end. That was true; two days ago he had come out of the office at around seven. Perhaps his work had ended earlier, but he had been forced to stay behind and wait for Matsuoka to show up. The thought made him feel guilty.

As Matsuoka drew up beside him, Hirosue looked surprised at his sudden appearance.

"Oh, thank you for yesterday." Hirosue hastily got to his feet and bowed his head. "You left the platform yesterday, so I thought you were going to come off the train."

Hirosue's prediction made perfect sense. Matsuoka glossed it over with a smile.

'I'm sorry. It looks like I've kept you waiting.'

"Don't worry. You haven't," came the predictable answer. Since the man was the type who took care not to make others feel bad, Matsuoka couldn't tell if he really hadn't waited, or if he was just saying so.

Matsuoka handed the paper bag he had been holding to Hirosue. The shoes inside were not the shoes he had borrowed, but a newly-bought pair; the soles of the borrowed pair had peeled cleanly off at the toe while Matsuoka was drying them. The rain had dealt a final blow to those shoes, which were already very well-worn.

Also inside the paper bag was the money that Hirosue had lent him that day. Hirosue didn't seem to notice yet that the bag he had accepted actually contained new shoes on top of the money. Matsuoka felt like he would have refused if he knew, and was relieved that the man was still oblivious. It was also a little fun to imagine the look of surprise on his face when he got home and found out.

"I'm really sorry. I ended up making you go through even more trouble."

Matsuoka shook his head. *'You were a lifesaver. I'm very grateful for your kindness,'* he wrote, and smiled at him. The man looked down as if to hide his blush. *He must be a really shy guy,* Matsuoka thought as he stared at the man's dark, unfashionable head of hair, which he hadn't even bothered to improve by dyeing it a lighter colour. *I wonder if he's even dated a girl, considering how he's acting now.* Matsuoka found himself even worrying about things that were really none of his business.

Hirosue's sheepishness and gentleness was strangely comforting to watch. Come to think of it, Matsuoka realized he hadn't come across this type of person in a while since he began working. He had close colleagues at work, but if they were both in the sales department, it made them rivals, which meant he couldn't truly be himself around them. Then, would he find it easier to open up to people from other departments? That was a hard question also. But as Fukuda said, work wasn't a place for hanging out, so he'd figured things were fine the way they were.

Maybe it's because I'm tired, Matsuoka answered his own question. That would explain his dressing in drag, and feeling comfort in this man.

"Uh, um—" The man suddenly looked up and spoke in a rather loud voice. Startled, Matsuoka unwittingly took a step back.

"W—Would I be able to get your phone number?" As soon as he said those words, Hirosue hastily apologized. "I'm sorry. I knew you couldn't talk, but I just... sorry. Um... your e-mail... can I have your mobile e-mail address?"³

His whole body was trembling, and his hands were laced together tightly. To top it off, his face was red like a monkey's. It was painfully obvious how much effort it had taken for the man to muster enough courage to ask for his e-mail address. He was anything but suave, asking for his phone number even though Matsuoka had told the man he couldn't speak. Normally, he would have been more than put off by this behaviour, but for some reason, he found it hard with this man.

'I'm sorry.' When Matsuoka showed the memo to him, the man's face turned clearly crestfallen. No matter how good of a man he was, Matsuoka had no intention of seeing him in drag again. That

3 As opposed to text-messaging, which is more common in North America and Europe, people in Japan use mobile e-mail. The concept around it is the same.

was why he wasn't going to give the man his e-mail address, either.

"I'm sorry for bothering you like that. Um... please just forget about what I said." The man laughed a little as he stared at his feet. "Really—don't worry about it." His voice grew smaller as his gaze fell to his feet again. Matsuoka felt guilty. Even after he left the platform and was climbing up the stairs, he felt like Hirosue's gaze was following him. He turned around several times, and each time, his eyes met with Hirosue's.

—Long ago as a boy, he had found an abandoned dog that he couldn't take home. Unable to simply pass it by, he remembered turning around again and again—so many years later, that memory suddenly came back to him.

One day, about a week after he had given the man the shoes and money, Matsuoka ended up stepping onto the same elevator as Hirosue. To top it off, they were alone together. Matsuoka was anxious that Hirosue might recognize him, but the man seemed not to be interested in Matsuoka at all. He only stared steadily at the elevator's floor indicator.

Matsuoka casually dropped his gaze to the man's feet and was filled with a little burst of joy. Hirosue was wearing the shoes he had given him. Their high quality was evident at first glance from the deep colour of real black leather. Hirosue's suit was a little worn, but he looked very smart if you only looked at his feet.

"We're on the fifth floor now."

The sudden utterance in his direction nearly startled Matsuoka out of his wits.

"Aren't you getting off?"

Matsuoka inclined his head awkwardly before getting off the elevator. He found it laughable that he was the only one getting flustered and agitated.

Now that he thought about it, Hirosue seemed to be more downcast than usual. He'd heard the man sigh in the elevator several times. But since they weren't close, he wasn't sure. It bothered Matsuoka, but he had no way of knowing more about it.

Hirosue's despondence nagged at Matsuoka like a fish bone stuck in the throat. He soon discovered the reason behind it within the day. On his way home from work, Matsuoka happened to run into Fukuda in the lobby, where he made the unusual move of inviting him out for dinner. Considering the griping he had been subjected to last time, he wasn't very eager to eat with the man again, but he wanted to ask about Hirosue.

They were shut out of their usual place because all the seats full, so they settled for a national *izakaya* franchise instead.

"You know, one of our central Sales people is quitting," Matsuoka began, as a way of broaching the topic. Fukuda was busy stuffing his mouth with a piece of grilled omelette.

"You mean Mr. Aramaki, right?" he said in a muffled voice.

"Do you know him?"

"What're you talking about? He was in charge of instructing us when we first started working here, remember? He has to take responsibility for the Sankyo contract he screwed up, doesn't he?"

"How do you know about the contract?"

Fukuda sniffed smugly.

"I'm dating Okabayashi from Sales. That's how I get my news."

Matsuoka wasn't surprised to hear Okabayashi's name. Fukuda liked pretty girls, and she seemed like a woman he would pick. Pretty was about all that Okabayashi was; she was unfriendly and proud, and every time she went to the restroom, she was gone for fifteen minutes. When she came out, her makeup would always be perfectly fixed. Last he'd heard, she had been dating Yoshida from the same sales department, but he hadn't heard about any breakup. Maybe she was two-timing him, but Matsuoka wasn't about to bring that up. It was much wiser to be the silent bystander than stir up relationship drama by snitching.

"There's someone in my department who might be laid off, too," Fukuda murmured. Matsuoka had a bad feeling.

"Who?" he asked nevertheless.

"Hirosue."

"Uh-huh," Matsuoka muttered, draining half of his beer. "So what'd he do?"

"You wouldn't believe it. The financial report he was supposed to submit at the internal meeting? He was a whole digit off."

Matsuoka cocked his head.

"Wait, don't you as a chief have to look over financial reports before they're sent up?"

Fukuda suddenly looked uncomfortable.

"Yeah, but Hirosue's subordinate was the one who made the mistake. Besides, do you know how many cases I have to go through in a day? I don't have time to be checking if every digit is correct. Well, you know, I did kind colour the story when I reported it to the higher-ups. I said he submitted it without going through me first. But it's his job as an assistant to confirm these things in advance, anyway."

No matter how many excuses he made, it was clear that Fukuda had thrust the responsibility that he ought to have taken on Hirosue. The man had always had this underhanded side to him, but Matsuoka had always dismissed it with a wry smile and a blind eye. As long as they didn't work together, he never had to fear any direct harm. But this time, the anger he felt was palpable.

"That Hirosue guy didn't deserve that," Matsuoka criticized. Fukuda went from looking guilty to throwing his chest out in defiance.

"Well, maybe it's partly his fault for being taken advantage of. I blamed him for all of it, and he didn't even try to explain himself. Some people might say he took it like a man, but that's basically running away, isn't it? If something's not true, he should just say so. Come at me straight-on, you know?"

Fukuda's selfish mindset knew no bounds. Just listening to him made Matsuoka feel ill.

"Anyway, thanks to that mistake he's been demoted from assistant chief and probably gotten into HR's bad books. To tell you the truth, I hope he'll just go on to get laid off so he can go where I don't have to see him anymore. Or maybe he could get transferred to a subsidiary. I wouldn't mind that, either."

Matsuoka laughed half-heartedly as he drank his beer. The suds were unbearably bitter as they stung the inside of his mouth.

That day, Matsuoka informed the office he would be heading straight home from his rounds, and went directly from his sales appointment to his apartment by train. There was moderately high traffic at this time of evening, at seven o'clock. Weary from the crowd closing around him and the damp odour of sweat, Matsuoka looked out the window for any distraction. When the train stopped at the closest station to the office, he happened to spot Hirose on the opposite platform. Perhaps he was waiting for someone; the man was sitting on the platform bench and looking up the entrance-exit stairs.

Two days later, Matsuoka was rushing back to the office from a sales appointment for some documents he had to submit first thing in the morning the next day. As he got off the train and walked towards the exit, he spotted Hirose sitting on the same bench as before.

Even after returning to the office, Matsuoka's thoughts were occupied with Hirose. It took him about an hour to get everything together. By the time he left the typed documents on the section chief's desk and left the office, it was nine. He went through the ticket gates of the station and was about to go down to the platform when, on a whim, he decided to walk to the opposite platform. He descended the stairs slowly. Partway down, their eyes met. It was the same gaze from an hour ago, which had been looking up at the stairs.

Matsuoka turned on his heel. He had a feeling that Hirose was waiting for the female version of himself. He'd guessed that Hirose was interested when he asked for his e-mail address, but he figured it was an interest he'd forget about quickly if they didn't see each other.

From the platform across, Matsuoka could still see the man sitting all alone, looking up at the stairs. Hirose remained unmoving even after Matsuoka boarded the train. The train began to move, and Hirose's figure went further and further into the distance. *You can wait there for as long as you want, but you're not going to see her*, he wished he could tell the man. Matsuoka hadn't dressed in drag once since handing the shoes to Hirose. He had intended to stop altogether from that incident on.

How long did he plan to wait? The mute woman was never going to appear again. Matsuoka imagined the man sitting day after day on the station bench, waiting for a woman that would never come. He was overcome with a forlornness that couldn't be put into words.

Matsuoka did his rounds with zeal and finished his work at the shockingly early hour of five-thirty in the evening. He declined his co-workers' invites to go drinking, headed straight home, showered, and changed his clothes. He paired a blue suit with a white scarf. He chose a pair of white high heels, quickly put on his makeup, and ran out the door.

He would see Hirose just one more time—that was his resolve for dressing in drag. He'd already scripted everything yesterday. If Hirose said he wanted to see Matsuoka again, or he wanted to date him, he would say he was getting married next month. Matsuoka felt positive that if he told Hirose he was marrying and moving far away, the man would be able to let go.

He had sown the seeds, so he was going to be the one to put an end to it. This way, he wouldn't have to put up with the rending thought of Hirose sitting day after day on the platform bench

looking for him.

At seven o'clock, a nervous Matsuoka stepped off the train at the station near his company. Even when he drew up right beside the man, Hirosue continued to look up the entrance-exit stairs and did not notice him. Since he couldn't just yell to get the man's attention, Matsuoka willed himself to look as natural as possible as he walked right past Hirosue's face. Even as he climbed the stairs, and even after what seemed like forever, no voice called him back. He kept walking until he finally ended up outside the station, at which point he felt the steam leave him.

Maybe it had all been his misunderstanding. Maybe Hirosue had been waiting for someone else, or maybe he was simply sitting there for no reason. Matsuoka was overcome with embarrassment that he had gone so far as to dress in drag intending to make Hirosue give up on him.

He turned on his heel to enter the opposite platform and go home, and almost yelled in surprise. Standing right there, close enough to bump into him, was Hirosue.

"Um, hello," the man stammered, out of breath. It was so sudden, Matsuoka couldn't even form a smile. He inclined his head vaguely instead.

"I'm glad to see you again," Hirosue smiled, then moved his hands strangely in front of Matsuoka's face. Unable to decipher what it meant, Matsuoka tilted his head. Hirosue looked confused at Matsuoka's lacklustre reaction.

"Can you understand me...?" His hands continued to gesture strangely. It wasn't until then that Matsuoka realized it was sign language. Hirosue must have thought they could converse in sign language since he couldn't talk.

Matsuoka took a memo pad out of his purse, thought for a little, then wrote.

'I lost my ability to talk last year because of an illness. I still can't understand sign language very well.'

Hirosue read the memo. "Oh, I see," he murmured. "I'm... I'm sorry."

Seeing the man look thoroughly miserable in turn made Matsuoka feel apologetic. The last thing he'd meant was to make the man feel guilty.

'But I'm touched by your kindness,' he wrote. The man patted his chest and his face relaxed in relief.

"Um, I'm sorry for making you buy brand-new shoes on top of paying me back. When I got home and opened the bag, I was surprised to find such a nice pair. I felt so bad that I made you go through all this extra trouble. I just wanted to thank you again."

Hirosue smiled a little and clicked his heels against the pavement.

"These are really comfortable. I love them. They're all I wear, every single day."

Matsuoka gave him a smile. *I know*, he answered mentally.

"Um... I know it sounds weird, giving a thank-you for a thank-you gift, but... if you don't have any plans, um... would you like to have dinner with me?"

Just as Matsuoka was about to say no, his stomach growled loudly. He blushed in embarrassment. Hirosue's face, which had been tense with nerves, softened a little.

"I don't know any fancy places, but I know a restaurant that serves good food. How about it?"

If he went to dinner with Hirosue, he would give the man false hope. But if he flat-out declined, it would probably hurt him. Unable come to a decision, Matsuoka didn't turn him down after all, and ended up going along.

He was then taken to a dirty *izakaya* that was clearly of questionable appearance for a date. If he were actually a woman, he felt like he would have turned on his heel the moment he saw the storefront. *You're taking a girl out here, not a guy friend. You could at least pick a nicer place*, he thought, but there was no way he could give that kind of advice.

When he was asked what he would like to drink, he chose beer. He wondered for a moment if he should restrain himself and pick oolong tea, since he was a girl, after all, but since this wasn't a swanky restaurant anyway, Matsuoka didn't try to be modest.

The place was dirty and gave him possibly the worst first impression ever, but as Hirosue said, the food was good. The seasoning was simple, "like mom used to make", which fit with Matsuoka's preference for Japanese food perfectly.

They didn't talk much while they ate. Hirosue would ask, "Is it good?" and Matsuoka would nod in reply. Partway through, a plate with a whole grilled fish was brought to the table. Matsuoka sat hesitantly for a while, unsure of where he should start, when a voice spoke up from across.

"I could divide it up, if you like."

Matsuoka didn't mind either way, but since it was hard to say so, he nodded vaguely instead. Hirosue immediately set to work on picking the fish apart. All the flesh was removed cleanly until only the bones remained. The man did it so nimbly that Matsuoka couldn't help but take out his memo pad and write, *'You're very good with your chopsticks.'*

The man grinned shyly.

"My hometown is on a harbour, so we had fish on the table almost every day. My mother's the type not to mind details much, but she was really strict when it came to eating fish. If I had one thing I wouldn't lose to anyone in, it'd be eating fish cleanly."

Matsuoka thought he was cute when he looked proud. The man certainly wasn't good-looking, and he'd brought Matsuoka to this dirty restaurant, but he wasn't a bad person. Matsuoka felt warm inside when he was with him.

Matsuoka ate the fish that had been set aside for him. It was flavourful and delicious. When he looked up, his eyes met with Hirosue's. The man hastily averted his eyes. It was unnatural. When Matsuoka lowered his face again for a while and looked up, their eyes met again.

When Matsuoka realized that the silence during the meal was due to Hirosue staring at him, he panicked. His body hair had always been sparse, and he usually only had to shave every two days. He'd also groomed himself properly before coming here, but he was suddenly anxious about whether he'd forgotten to shave a spot or if he was making manly gestures.

Now that he was self-conscious, it made him rather nervous. Matsuoka ate only the portion of fish that had been set aside for him, then put his chopsticks down. When he looked up, Hirosue wasn't looking at him anymore. Matsuoka watched the man eat in silence, and way he delicately and elegantly handled his chopsticks.

It was past nine when they finished eating. Since the restaurant was beginning to get crowded, they got up to leave. Hirosue said he would pay, and Matsuoka accepted the offer graciously. He knew as a man that it was easier for them when women allowed themselves to be treated graciously, so he purposely didn't interfere. Instead, he showed a memo to Hirosue outside the restaurant saying 'Thank you,' and smiled at him.

Their walk took a natural turn to the station, and the man gradually spoke less and less. Matsuoka hoped Hirosue would stay like this and not say anything until they parted ways at the station. If they could part with a simple goodbye, he would be spared from lying about getting married or moving away, and things would end cleanly.

Even if they were to part ways here, Matsuoka hoped to talk with Hirosue again. Next time, he would be wearing a suit when he approached the man. Since General Affairs and Sales didn't mingle, instead he would frequent that restaurant, where Hirosue was apparently a regular. He would approach him in a natural way, saying something like, "Say, aren't we from the same company?" He wanted to sit down and have a nice, long chat with this man, minus any ulterior motives or strategic calculation.

"Um—!"

When the man spoke up as they approached the station entrance, Matsuoka knew it was finally coming. He steeled himself and faced Hirosue.

"Um..." No further words came. Matsuoka felt impatience creep up on him as the words struggled to come out.

"Ah..."

The man continued to stammer "um" and "ah" before blanching and squatting weakly in the middle of the road. Matsuoka hastily went to his side and scribbled a memo to show him.

'Are you alright?'

"I—I'm fine. I'm sorry." Hirosue stood up, but he was still a little unsteady on his feet. "I haven't been this nervous since I recited an English speech for a contest in middle school. I remember that time, too, my heart was beating really fast, and I started to feel ill..."

Hirosue looked steadily at Matsuoka.

"Please tell me your name." His voice was shaking. Matsuoka's heart fluttered strangely at being stared at like this.

"Won't you?"

Matsuoka felt like it would be a brutal rejection to refuse giving his name. But there was no way he could give his real one. Pressed by the man's pleading gaze, Matsuoka took out his memo pad.

'Yoko Eto.' He ended up writing his mother's maiden name.

"Ms. Yoko Eto, I'm Motofumi Hirosue."

Hirosue looked up from gazing intently at Matsuoka's hands to press a slightly-curved finger to his mouth and laugh quietly.

"Funny, isn't it? This is our fourth time meeting and we didn't even know each other's names." Come to think of it, it was true. Matsuoka laughed a little along with him.

"Will you be friends with me?" It came unexpectedly amidst Matsuoka's moment of warmth.

"Someone as beautiful as you, Ms. Eto, might be dating someone already. But if it's not trouble for you—"

Matsuoka couldn't bring himself to nod.

"Can't I even be friends with you?"

Friends—it was a dangerously difficult expression. Hirosue wasn't going as far as to say he wanted to date. But since Matsuoka had vowed not to dress in drag anymore, he didn't want to see

this man again in this form. He clutched his pen, making up his mind to refuse.

"Then will you just trade e-mail addresses with me, even?"

Matsuoka stopped writing. If they e-mailed each other, he wouldn't have to talk, and they wouldn't have to meet in person. Matsuoka gazed fixedly at Hirosue. He was a man who could wait like a dog every day on the platform without even knowing if Matsuoka would show up or not. He was taking a gamble which he had no assurances of winning; did this lack of smarts come naturally, or was he just that serious?

Matsuoka turned a page of his memo pad, wrote his mobile e-mail address and handed it to Hirosue. He felt it would be easier to end things through e-mail rather than rejecting him here and having to see Hirosue look heartbroken. As far as he was concerned, he had only chosen the easier route; despite that, Hirosue looked very happy.

"Thank you." Hirosue folded the scrap of paper like a treasure, and put it away inside his bag.

They parted ways once they were past the ticket gates, and Matsuoka went down to the opposite platform. Hirosue was standing on the other side, and when he spotted Matsuoka, he waved his right hand in large swinging motions. Embarrassed, Matsuoka settled with giving him a small wave back.

Hirosue's eyes never left him from the platform on the other side, even after the train had begun to move, until they could no longer see each other. A short moment afterwards, Matsuoka got an e-mail on his phone. It was a strange address, and he wondered who it could be as he opened the e-mail. It was Hirosue.

'Thank you for coming out with me today.'

Matsuoka scrolled down.

'I couldn't say this to you directly, but in my whole life I've never seen someone as beautiful as you.'

Matsuoka flushed furiously in the train as he clutched his phone. It was clear the man hadn't said it for laughs. He wondered what kind of look the man had on his face as he wrote this, and his whole body broke out into a sweat with embarrassment.

Matsuoka immediately wrote a reply.

'No, I should be thanking you. You're a very kind person, Mr. Hirosue, full of warmth. I felt very comfortable talking with you.'

After sending the text, Matsuoka chuckled a little.

Summer passed by. One faintly-chilly morning in the beginning of autumn, Matsuoka turned off his third alarm clock, pulled the sheets over his head and curled up in bed. Soon, his cell phone started ringing. For a while he refused to move, but he knew this was the last chance given to him. He reluctantly picked up the phone.

"Good morning." A trace of a smile could be detected in the voice that echoed placidly in his sleepy ears. "Ten rings. I think you've set a record. You'll be late for work if you dawdle too much. I'm leaving my house for work now, too. Bye, then."

The line went dead. Matsuoka sluggishly got out of bed and typed an e-mail while he brushed his teeth.

'Was it me or was it really cold this morning? I want to be in bed still, to tell you the truth.' He pressed "send". He got a new message while he was pouring himself coffee.

'You're right, it was cold. Have you been tucking yourself in properly at night so you don't get sick?' Matsuoka replied while drinking his coffee.

*'Not bragging or anything, but I haven't caught a cold in years. You know what they say about how certain types of people don't catch colds.'*⁴

After sending a reply, Matsuoka changed into his suit. He fixed his hair and picked up his bag. Amidst his preparations, he received another e-mail.

'It's rare to hear someone say that about herself. From what I know, you seem like quite the competent office worker.'

Matsuoka left his apartment and typed as he walked.

'Why would you think I'm competent? All I do is send you lame e-mails.'

He went through the ticket gates at the station and boarded the train. In the crowded car, he heard the sound of his ring tone as he received an e-mail, but he could barely move a finger. It wasn't until he got off the train that he was able to check the message.

'I don't think your e-mails are lame. But I do think you're very honest. I'm almost at work now, so I'll e-mail you again at night. Have a good day at work.'

Matsuoka stowed his cell phone in his bag. Straight-laced Hirose never sent e-mails from work. It was common sense, but there were always people who couldn't follow these kinds of basic rules, no matter how old they got. Matsuoka himself had sent a few e-mails from work when he was still dating his girlfriend.

Maybe it was nothing to be so rigid about; maybe it was alright as long as no one found out and you didn't cause trouble for anyone. But the sight of this man being so proper made Matsuoka feel like he needed to be proper, too. It was strange.

Ever since telling Hirose his e-mail address, Matsuoka was getting frequent messages from the man. In fact, he got several of them a day. Matsuoka at first intended to reply a few times before asking the man not to e-mail him anymore, but he found himself enjoying their conversations more than he had planned. Unable to turn him down, Matsuoka kept letting it drag on until they had been in contact for nearly a month. One of the reasons why Matsuoka had trouble rejecting him flat-out was because Hirose never sent him anything that hinted at the romantic, or anything along the lines of "I love you" or "I want to see you".

His frequent messages came like one friend to another; for Matsuoka, who had been dumped by his girlfriend and was losing touch with his friends from university, these messages were a good distraction from his loneliness. Hirose also never sent two messages in a row if Matsuoka didn't reply. Matsuoka quite liked that he could carry on the conversation at his own pace.

It was about a week ago that he had begun receiving wake-up calls.

'I can't get up in the mornings. I was almost late for work again today,' he'd said in an e-mail to Hirose once.

'I could give you a wake-up call if you like,' came his answer.

4 "Idiots don't catch colds" - a Japanese proverb, supposedly coming from the fact that an idiot can't tell whether he's sick or not.

'Then call me at seven tomorrow morning,' Matsuoka had said, half joking.

'I wouldn't mind doing that, but I don't have your phone number,' was the reply. Since they had been exchanging e-mails for about three weeks now, Matsuoka was under the impression that Hirosue already knew his number as well. He couldn't decide whether or not to give the man his number. He hadn't been intending to let Hirosue step any further into his life than e-mailing. However, considering how polite and courteous Hirosue had been so far, he probably wouldn't call without good reason—so Matsuoka gave the man his number. Just as he predicted, Hirosue never rang him except for the wake-up calls at seven in the morning.

Now, they exchanged messages about three or four times in the morning and in the evening. Even if the e-mails were about ordinary things, like 'I just ate' or 'I bought a book on the way home from work', Matsuoka still happily anticipated receiving them.

Even if they couldn't see each other, Matsuoka could still sense the man's kindness and consideration from his writing, and just reading it tugged his face into a smile and made him feel warm inside.

Aside from inserting a feminine sentence-ending here and there, Matsuoka acted like himself when he messaged Hirosue. Part of it came from his intention to destroy the overly-glorified image Hirosue seemed to have of him. His efforts seemed to work; Hirosue's tension fell away as they exchanged more and more messages. Sometimes, he would even insert jokes that were lame enough to put a wry smile on Matsuoka's face. On these occasions, Matsuoka told the man outright he wasn't funny, internally telling himself he was giving the man life lessons.

'Was it really that lame...?' would come Hirosue's feeble reply, making Matsuoka burst into laughter in front of his cell phone.

As soon as Matsuoka arrived at the office, he was kidnapped by Hayama, in administration. She told him she had to prepare materials to submit first thing this morning, and at this rate there was no way she would make it. She tearfully begged him to help. To be frank, Matsuoka had nothing to do with this. But Hayama was a fellow co-worker who had started working here in the same year as him, and seeing her nearly in tears made it hard to ignore her.

The copier in their department wasn't fast enough, so Matsuoka and Hayama went down to the copier room on the second floor.

The copier room was open to all departments, and they found Hirosue was inside. Matsuoka would normally entertain himself by discretely observing the oblivious man, but right now there was no time for that. They hogged four out of five copiers in the room and ran them simultaneously. They had thirty minutes to copy fifty sets of thirty-one sheets. It seemed simply impossible.

"You can use this, too." Hirosue freed up a copier, so they used that one, too. They couldn't start binding the sheets until every one of them was copied, so they could do nothing but watch until the copies were done. Hayama was teary-eyed as she stood beside the copier.

"How did you end up in this fix, anyway? Don't you usually prepare materials a day in advance?" Matsuoka asked.

"I don't know," she said obtusely.

"What do you mean, you don't know? That's careless of you."

"Ms. Okabayashi is the careless one!" Hayama exclaimed indignantly. "I told her yesterday to make fifty copies of these materials, with thirty pages in each set, by tomorrow morning. But when morning rolled around, she said I hadn't told her anything! When I snapped at her she started crying, and then the manager was all, 'Did you really tell Okabayashi?', like I was the guilty one..."

Matsuoka recalled another incident that involved Okabayashi and a dispute over whether or not she had received an order from a company. No harm had been done that time because the partner company had called to confirm the order in advance. Nevertheless, Okabayashi had insisted she hadn't received the order, while the company representative insisted that she had. At the end of the whole affair, it was never made clear who was responsible.

"She's always been careless," Hayama continued angrily. "And when a problem comes up because of it, she just goes and blames it all on other people." She dabbed at her watery eyes with her fingers and gave a loud snuffle.

"Um—" said a timid voice. Matsuoka turned around to see Hirosue standing there uncertainly. "If you're in a rush to make copies, there's another copier in the Development department on the second floor. You can put the copies together in the small meeting room on the fourth floor, since no one's probably using it at this hour. I don't think it's locked, either."

As soon as Hayama heard this, she took the original documents and made a mad dash for the second floor.

"Does she need them for the morning meeting?" Hirosue asked.

Matsuoka nodded.

"The president usually talks for the first fifteen minutes of morning meetings, so I think you could get away with delivering the materials afterwards."

Hirosue peered at the materials that were already copied.

"I'm in General Affairs, so I'll be going back to the seventh floor. How about I stop by the small meeting room and lay out whatever is done? In order of the page numbers, right?"

"But—"

"It's just on the way. Please don't worry about it." Hirosue flashed him a smile and gathered about ten bundles of copied papers before leaving the copier room. For Matsuoka, there was no doubt that it was a huge help. But truthfully he was surprised that Hirosue seemed to be like this towards everyone. Sure, they were fellow employees, but their departments were different and they barely knew each other. *It's all unwanted hassle he could have avoided*, Matsuoka thought, then caught himself. Being kind to others seemed to come as second nature to Hirosue. That was actually pretty amazing, in Matsuoka's honest opinion.

With Hirosue's advice, they somehow managed to deliver the materials in time for the meeting. But their moment of relief was cut short as Hayama was summoned at once to the manager's desk. Her appeals fell on deaf ears, and the discussion seemed to be progressing under the assumption that she had not given Okabayashi the instructions. It was piteous to see Hayama's profile as she bit her lip, desperately fighting back tears.

As for the root of all evil, she was still seated at her desk, looking at Hayama with not a smidgeon of guilt on her insolent face. Matsuoka had been careful not to stick his head in

disagreements, since Okabayashi was Fukuda's girlfriend and all, but this time he wasn't about to remain a simple bystander.

Matsuoka got up from his seat and nonchalantly approached the manager's desk.

"Um, excuse me," he said, "I actually overheard Ms. Hayama asking Ms. Okabayashi to make copies."

An unpleasant ripple of hushed voices ran through the people around him. Hayama was looking at him with a stunned face.

"Is that true?" the manager asked gravely. He was turning forty-five this year, but his thinning hair made him look five years older.

"Yes."

"He's lying." Okabayashi stood up. Her usually-rosy cheeks were deathly pale.

"But I heard it."

"You're lying! You weren't here that time, Mr. Matsuoka. You were out on your rounds."

Matsuoka exhaled and hunched his shoulders.

"Okay, I might not have been here, but Hayama *did* actually tell you to make copies, then?"

Okabayashi finally seemed to realize she had dug her own grave in front of everyone.

"N—No, that's not true!"

"What's not true? You said so yourself. 'That time.' By 'that time', you mean the time she told you to make copies, right?"

Okabayashi curled up on the spot and burst into tears. Frankly, it was annoying.

"What's crying going to do?" Matsuoka said coldly. "You're a full-grown adult. Crying every time something doesn't go your way isn't going to solve anything. What were you thinking, anyway, making other people clean up after your mistakes? Did you think Hayama deserved to get in trouble instead of you?"

Okabayashi, who had been sobbing loudly up until now, abruptly got up and ran out of the room. No one tried to go after her.

At eight in the evening, Matsuoka got a message as he was getting out of the shower. It was from Hirose.

'I just got home. I'm eating a makunouchi⁵ bento from the convenience store.'

'I had a bowl of beef rice on the way home,' Matsuoka said in his reply.

He got another message while he was watching television.

'It must take a lot of courage for a lady like you to go into a beef-rice shop by herself. I admire you. I go sometimes, too. At the end of the month and stuff,' said his message, which hinted at a rather woeful financial state.⁶ Salaries were commission-based in the sales department, which meant Matsuoka's net income increased the more contracts he got. In terms of salary, he enjoyed better conditions than other

5 A slightly more expensive type of bento containing rice and an assortment of meat, fish, eggs, pickles, and vegetables.

6 Beef-rice shops are cheap and fast, and its customers are predominantly male office workers with no time and/or money.

departments.

"He's honest to the point of stupidity, really," Matsuoka muttered to himself.

For an average woman, the idea of a man having to go to beef-rice shops at the end of the month because he was running out of money was certainly not attractive. But Hirosue didn't seem to mind talking about himself like this. Matsuoka was amused by his lack of superficial pride.

'Mr. Hirosue, you did something nice today, didn't you?' Matsuoka wrote with an air of mystery, remembering the copier incident this morning. He got a reply immediately.

'What do you mean, something nice?'

'Try asking your heart,' he replied.

'I don't know,' came the answer.

Hirosue's help with the copies had left an impression on Matsuoka, but the man himself didn't particularly seem to think anything of it. It was kind of admirable how he could forget so easily about what he did.

'That's fine if you don't know,' he wrote, and got a question back in reply.

'Did you see me somewhere today, Ms. Yoko?'

Matsuoka thought for a bit, then wrote back. *'It's a secret.'*

'No fair. I wanted to see you, too.'

Matsuoka inserted his cell phone in the charging dock and flopped down on his bed. He absently wondered if it was high time that mute Yoko Eto disappeared. It was fun exchanging messages, but day by day he was beginning to feel like it was time to move on.

He wanted to become friends with Hirosue, but if he lost Yoko Eto, he would have to meet with the man all over again as Yosuke Matsuoka. Seeing how close they were already, it seemed like a lot of extra work starting their relationship again from scratch. He sighed impatiently.

How did it come to this, he wondered. No doubt it was his own fault for not turning Hirosue down properly, and Matsuoka hated himself for it.

Once October passed its halfway point, signs of autumn were well evident in the parks Matsuoka passed by on the way to a sales visit, or even in the trees lining the streets. It was nearly two months since he had started to exchange messages with Hirosue as Yoko Eto.

That day, Matsuoka didn't get a single message from Hirosue even after he had gotten home from work. He didn't want to disturb Hirosue with a trivial e-mail if the man was busy, so he decided not to initiate a conversation.

The next morning, Matsuoka was so worried about not getting a single message the previous day that he woke up at his first alarm, stayed still between the sheets, and waited for his cell phone to ring. Although he did get his wake-up call at seven, Hirosue's voice was listless.

"You were quick today. Were you already awake, by any chance? I'll e-mail you tonight. Bye, then..."

None of the playful word games he usually said in the morning. Now Matsuoka was positive that something was up with Hirosue, but he didn't want to force anything out of the man before he brought it up himself. He decided to wait until evening.

At eight o'clock, Matsuoka finally got a message from Hirose. He opened it immediately, since it had been on his mind since yesterday.

'I want to see you.'

That was all it said. No matter how badly Hirose wanted to see him, Matsuoka had no plans to meet him in drag again. So he wrote, *'I can't,'* then sent it.

'But I really want to see you,' came the reply again.

Matsuoka found it strange that a man who was tactful enough to know his limits was suddenly so stubborn about seeing him. He sensed he ought to find out *why* the man wanted to see him, rather than worrying about whether to meet him or not.

'Did something happen?' he wrote.

'Are you watching me from somewhere, Ms. Yoko?' came the reply.

Usually, Matsuoka found it wearisome listening to other people vent, but this time it was different.

'If you want to talk about something, I'm here to listen,' he wrote. Hirose was an exception. If the man had made a mistake, Matsuoka wanted to console him. If something bad had happened to him, he wanted to tell him that good things would come later.

It was a long time before he got an answer. One hour passed, then two. Maybe it would end tonight without even a goodnight e-mail, Matsuoka thought. But close to twelve midnight, it came.

'Something bad did happen, but I would end up complaining, so I won't talk about it. I'm sure you wouldn't enjoy hearing me talk about my company, about a place you don't know, and it wouldn't be very pleasant. Please forget about my e-mail today. I'll never say I want to see you again. I'd be thankful if could still continue to e-mail me,' he wrapped up neatly.

The e-mail was unexpectedly lacking of all that Matsuoka had braced himself for. He read it over and over until he realized something: *'I'll never say I want to see you again,'* Hirose had written. It was as if he knew Matsuoka didn't want to hear it from him. Perhaps he had picked up the cues from their daily interactions.

He felt guilty about what he was about to do to Hirose, who was already so unhappy he was begging to see Matsuoka. But in Matsuoka's opinion, this really meant the end for Yoko Eto. Since he always acted like himself around him, he was prone to forgetting this fact: Hirose was in love with Yoko Eto, not him. It was stupid for the man to be hurt over not being able to meet with an illusion.

'Let's not e-mail each other anymore,' he wrote. *'There's something I haven't been telling you. I'm in love with someone.'*

Matsuoka sent the e-mail with the firm belief that this wasn't going to sever his connection with Hirose. Even if he had to start from square one, as long as he tried the best he could, he believed they would some day be able to talk honestly as friends.

His phone rang not even five minute after he had sent the e-mail. The ringtone was that of his daily wake-up calls. He immediately knew it was Hirose. He debated it for a great while, but ended up taking the call.

"Sorry for calling so late. This is Hirose." He sounded extremely gloomy, so unlike his usual self. *"Thank you for picking up. I won't e-mail you anymore, nor will I call you, so you don't have to worry. I figured you were already in love with someone, to tell you the truth. So I actually wasn't very*

surprised when I read your e-mail.”

Hirosue spoke in regular, detached manner.

“I just wanted to tell you how I feel one last time, with my voice and not through e-mail. So I’m really happy that you’re listening to me right now.”

Matsuoka swallowed hard as he held his cell phone. Even if he knew what was coming, he felt nervous.

“I love you.” Hirosue let out a self-deprecating laugh after his confession. “I’m sure you could already tell even before I told you so.”

The silence wore on over the line. Matsuoka could do nothing but wait for his next words.

“I’m sorry. I knew this was just going to make you uncomfortable. Thank you for putting up with me all this time. Goodbye.”

Even after his last words, the line did not go dead. Unable to hang up himself, Matsuoka waited for the other’s response.

“Um...” he heard after a while. “Would you be able to hang up first?”

He hung up just as the man had asked. The moment he felt their connection die, Matsuoka was filled with a loneliness that surprised him. It was strange, since he was the one who had brought up parting ways in the first place, but there was no disguising his honest feelings.

The next morning, Matsuoka arrived at the office and found out why Hirosue had been acting weird recently: it was posted on the common bulletin board on the first floor. With the advent of internal e-mail networks, it was rare these days to see human-resources decisions being physically posted up like this, but this company still engaged in this habit.

“It’s like public shaming,” a co-worker in Matsuoka’s cohort had once said. That was because promotions were posted along with demotions. What had been posted today was clearly the latter.

Re: Motofumi Hirosue of General Affairs

As of October 25, it has been announced that the above-mentioned will be seconded to Koishikawa Research Laboratory.

Matsuoka read the text over and over. Koishikawa Research Lab, like its name implied, was a department that mainly handled research and development. Unless you had technical expertise, there wasn’t much significance in working there. If a worker who joined the company on a general-duties track⁷ was sent to Koishikawa, he was in fact being relegated. He would be cast off like a dead weight from one department to another in this manner until he was finally laid off.

If I knew this was going to happen—Matsuoka regretted parting ways with Hirosue yesterday. Reeling from his demotion, the man had asked to see him. But far from consoling him, Matsuoka had told a huge lie and said he was in love with someone else.

He felt his heart wring painfully. If he had known, he wouldn’t have told the man he would

7 Two main career tracks exist in many Japanese companies: the “executive track” and “general-duties track”. People in the general-duties track often do predefined tasks, clerical work, or are assistants to other workers.

stop the e-mails, that he already loved someone else. He would have been okay with dressing in drag again once to meet with him. If seeing him would have made the man feel even a little better—

He thought he heard Fukuda's voice. Matsuoka turned around. Fukuda was exchanging greetings with the women at the reception desk. He crossed the entrance lobby, walking past the common bulletin board towards the elevators.

"Morning," Matsuoka said to him. He spoke clearly enough and their eyes did meet, but he was promptly ignored.

"Hey, Fukuda."

Called by his name, the man finally stopped.

"What? I'm kind of in a rush right now."

Fukuda was Matsuoka's closest colleague among his cohorts, but his attitude was unusually cold today. *Someone's in a bad mood*, Matsuoka thought in irritation as he clicked his tongue discreetly.

"I want to talk to you about something. How about dinner tonight?"

"Yeah, I have plans this evening." He was promptly turned down.

"Tomorrow, then."

"I have errands tomorrow, too. I'm pretty busy these days. I don't have any free time. You guys seem to be taking it easy, though. Lucky you."

Matsuoka didn't know where Fukuda was getting the idea that Sales "took it easy". The man's nasty tone also got on his nerves, and he responded waspishly.

"So when *are* you free? Next month? Next year?"

Fukuda gave him a clearly annoyed look. "Fine, I'll be straight with you. I actually don't want to talk to you right now."

"What? What did I ever do to you?"

They hadn't contacted each other for weeks and had barely exchanged any words. Matsuoka couldn't think of anything Fukuda might be angry with him about.

"You know, I like you, and I acknowledge you're one of the better ones out of our hiring year. But just because you're good at your work, it doesn't mean you can take it out on people below you, you know what I mean?"

"Huh?" Matsuoka cocked his head.

"That co-worker in your year? You lied to cover her ass, saying she did something she didn't even do, and you humiliated my girlfriend in front of everyone."

Matsuoka realized he was talking about Okabayashi's blaming incident from about half a month ago.

"You mean the thing about making copies?"

"Yeah. You know how much crap you caused because of that? She was in tears, and she was talking about quitting and everything. Apparently from what she's telling me, you've always been mean to her."

Matsuoka furrowed his brow deeply. He had no time to interact with Okabayashi, coldly or otherwise, when he was out of the office all day on sales visits. Women like her, who could easily blame others for their mistakes, seemed to feel no guilt towards lying. No doubt she had told her story to her boyfriend in a way that worked conveniently for her and made her seem innocent.

In this case, strongly refuting what she said would only make things worse and turn Fukuda against him more. That much was clear.

Matsuoka dropped his gaze and looked at his feet.

"I didn't meant to act coldly towards her. These days I've been out of the office a lot, so I haven't talked to her much. But if I somehow made her feel bad, I apologize. I'm sorry."

At Matsuoka's humble attitude, Fukuda's icy demeanour seemed to soften a little.

"As long as you understand, man. She can be sensitive, you know, so just be careful about that next time."

A woman who brazenly ensnared her co-worker didn't exactly seem like the sensitive type, but Matsuoka carefully avoided that topic. It was useless to say anything to a man wearing the rose-coloured glasses of romance.

"I'm really sorry."

"It's fine."

By apologizing over and over, he alleviated Fukuda's distrust towards him. Matsuoka looked at his watch. They had less than five minutes until the work day started.

"Say, I had something I needed to tell you. It's about Ms. Okabayashi, and it's been on my mind a lot. I didn't know if I should tell you, but I thought it would be a bad idea if you didn't know..." Matsuoka trailed off pointedly, then looked at his watch. "Oh, look at the time. Tell you the rest later."

"H-Hey! Wait a minute!"

He could feel the man biting at his bait. Fukuda came running after him as he headed for the elevators.

"Don't leave me hanging like that. Now I want to know. What about her?"

"Yeah, but work is starting." Matsuoka glanced at his watch exaggeratedly.

"Tonight, then. Let's talk over dinner."

Fukuda had apparently cleanly forgotten about the "plans" he had mentioned to turn Matsuoka's invite down.

"But I thought you said you couldn't tonight?"

"That's fine, I can work it out. So, we're good for tonight, right?"

Before long, it struck eight-thirty, the beginning of the work day. Matsuoka and Fukuda hurried into the elevator.

"I'll e-mail you when I'm done work," Fukuda said with emphasis as he clapped Matsuoka on the shoulder. Matsuoka got off the elevator first on the fifth floor, and got to his desk one minute late. As soon as he put his bag down, he went over to Hayama, the administrative staff.

"I was wondering if I could ask you about something," he said. "How about lunch together? My treat."

It was not too hot, not too cold. Matsuoka had longed for this time of the year, at the end of October. He neither had to deal with the weariness of smelling his own sweat like he did in the summer, nor did he have to freeze to death like he did in the winter.

The air was slightly on the chilly side as he walked side-by-side with Fukuda. When he tried to

head for an *izakaya*, Fukuda intervened.

"I'm actually out of money this month," he admitted. Matsuoka didn't mind spotting him, but Fukuda had a bad habit of remembering what people owed to him while forgetting what he owed to others.

"So am I," Matsuoka lied, heading directly for a beef-rice shop.

As soon as they got to their seats, Fukuda went straight for the main subject even before they had been served water.

"So, about my girlfriend," he said.

"Hey, no rush," Matsuoka said soothingly. "Let's order first. I actually have some things I want to ask you, too. Mind if I go first?"

He added the last bit intentionally. Fukuda didn't go so far as to override his request, and grew quiet. He ordered an up-sized beef rice and a beer, he turned to Matsuoka.

"So what's this you wanted to ask me about?" he asked. It was obvious he wanted to get Matsuoka's story over with so he could go on to talk about his girlfriend.

"You know that guy from General Affairs... Hirosue, was it? You know how he's being transferred. Is it a demotion, or what?"

"Yeah, that's right," Fukuda said lightly, raking his bangs back. "It's all a result of his cumulative performance and his work ethic. I think HR has chosen an appropriate spot for him."

I don't know about performance, but he certainly has better work ethic than you, Matsuoka spat inwardly.

"But Hirosue's not that old, is he? He looks thirty-three or thirty-four, around."

"He's thirty-three."

"Wouldn't it save the company more money to cut off someone who's higher up, salary-wise?"

"I guess," Fukuda said with disinterest. "But that's what HR decided, so," he shrugged.

"But you're the one reporting workers' behaviour to HR as their superior, right? Which means you must have written some pretty harsh stuff."

"Oh, can you tell?" Fukuda said smugly as he gave Matsuoka a sidelong glance. "I know from this incident now that HR actually reads that stuff. I'll admit I wrote some pretty nasty things. I can't *stand* that guy, you know."

It was absolutely unthinkable to let personal likes and dislikes take the reins over a decision that could change someone's life. Matsuoka felt his temper rise at the casual way Fukuda spoke about it, but he settled with merely grunting "mm-hmm" in reply.

"Anyone can tell that it's a demotion, so you bet even he's pretty downcast about it. But when I think about how I only have to wait five more days until I don't have to see his face again, I even feel kind of sorry for him, you know?"

Feel sorry for him? You did this to him in the first place! Matsuoka felt like grabbing the man by the collar and giving him a good shake.

"Oh yeah, there's a farewell party for Hirosue the day after tomorrow. The guy who works under him organized it. Personally, I didn't think we needed to. You know, it's kind of mean to send him off with a fanfare and everything when he's being demoted. That's why I kept quiet, but some people are just meddlers, you know. Man, I don't even have money right now. Why do I have to pitch

in for that guy's farewell party when I'm broke? It's unfair."

So now it was unfair. Matsuoka felt the energy leave him. What kind of questionable judgement had made the General Affairs manager pick someone like him to be chief? *Sure, he's skilful enough to do a decent job, but he's got zero merits as a person. Zero.*

Just then, their bowls of beef rice arrived, putting a temporary hold on their conversation. Matsuoka wolfed his beef rice down. His anger had apparently taken over his taste buds too, for he couldn't enjoy it at all. Fukuda took a long draught of beer, emptying about half his glass before letting out a great sigh.

"Speaking of Hirosue, there's just one thing that's on my mind about him. A little while ago, I think, one of the girls in administration said she saw him walking with a *really* pretty girl. Apparently she wasn't just any pretty, she was gorgeous—her face was so beautiful it would even make other girls swoon. When she asked him who the girl was, he apparently said she was a friend. She teased him and said if he'd known such a pretty girl all this time, he should have introduced her to everyone else. He didn't agree to it, though."

A serious man like Hirosue—a man who had confessed his love to him—would never go out walking with another woman. The "pretty girl" had to be Matsuoka.

"But if you think about it, you know, there's no way that Hirosue could get a pretty girlfriend. He's not that good-looking, his hair's an awkward mess, and he wears the same suit all year round. My guess is that this girl is a soap-girl or cabaret girl.⁸ That's probably why he can't introduce her to people. Makes sense, right?"

Matsuoka wondered how many insults Fukuda had to pile onto Hirosue before he was satisfied.

"I know!" Fukuda exclaimed. "What do you think about putting him in the hot seat about it at his farewell party? We'll prod him to call the girl, and we'll ask her directly what she does as a job. Dude, this is gonna be so funny!"

Matsuoka slammed his empty beer glass down on the counter. Fukuda whipped around in surprise.

"What was that?"

"Sorry. Just ran out of beer."

He was immediately served a second glass, and Matsuoka downed it in one draught. "So where's his farewell party going to be held?" he asked.

"Where? This Vietnamese restaurant called Mùa Xuân on East Road, apparently. Why? What about it?"

Matsuoka took a long breath.

"We're doing a farewell party soon, too. I thought I'd ask to get some ideas."

"Heard it's pretty good there," Fukuda murmured before changing the topic. "So about my girlfriend," he began. "What were you about to say this morning?"

"Oh, right. That." Matsuoka let out a short sigh. In exchange for treating Hayama for lunch, he

8 "Soaps" are private baths where the female workers offer sexual services. "Cabaret clubs" are essentially hostess clubs, where male patrons pay to be served drinks and be entertained by female workers. Regular customers are sometimes privileged with going on dates with workers outside of work hours.

had gleaned a lot of information from her. Okabayashi was still dating Yoshida from Sales, and was two-timing him with Fukuda. Her real love, however, was a club host. Apparently she was running out of money from spending too much on him, but was managing to hang on by selling the brand-name gifts that the other two men had bought for her. Her lack of morals was appalling.

Perhaps it would have been relatively harmless if all she did was have men wrapped around her thumb; however, this woman even went as far as to spread stories about what sex was like with those men. According to her, the host was the best, unsurprisingly; Yoshida's skill was apparently "not too bad". Matsuoka couldn't help but feel sorry for Fukuda: if he hadn't gone out with Okabayashi, he wouldn't have had to be called "a two-pump chump who lay there like a dead fish."

"Don't leave me hanging, come on."

Fukuda's nagging firmly sealed Matsuoka's decision. He had considered doing the man a favour by keeping silent, but he lost all sympathy after hearing the cruel ordeal Hirotsue had been put through.

He didn't know how accurate this second-hand story was, but just this once, Matsuoka decided to be the irresponsible man and air all the dirty laundry he had heard from Hayama.

Matsuoka stood in front of a shuttered store, two doors down from the Vietnamese restaurant, Mưa Xuân.

This was really going to be his last time crossdressing. His flower-print dress was simple, but had a very nice silhouette; as for the cardigan he wore on top, he picked the cutest one he could find. He aimed to become a woman whom one hundred out of one hundred men would find cute.

This was his first time doing personal shopping during work hours, but he had no choice; he wouldn't have time to buy clothes after work.

Matsuoka browsed the shop windows for a place that stocked tasteful and cute clothes, and once he found one, he ran inside. He'd never bought women's clothes in a store before, but he felt no hesitation in doing it.

"I want to give clothes to my girlfriend for her birthday. She's about the same size as me. I want the cutest thing you have," he told the salesperson.

The associate appeared not to doubt him at all.

"She's a lucky girl to have such a nice boyfriend," she smiled as she picked out some clothes.

On the day of Hirotsue's farewell party, Matsuoka rushed back to his apartment, polished his body to perfection, and spent an hour putting on his makeup. He pulled all the stops putting on his face, using all of the technique he had built up until now. He couldn't go too overboard, since thick makeup would make him look flashy, like a woman of the night. He made sure just to emphasize his eyes and double eyelids as much as he could, and aimed for a look that was cute, but at the same time, stunningly beautiful.

The woman in the mirror wearing the flower-print dress and the ultimate face of makeup was the picture of perfection. He was much, much cuter than the models in the women's magazines he used as reference. It was almost frightening how beautiful he was, if he could say so himself. But Matsuoka still felt like it wasn't enough, and practised smiling in the mirror over and over.

Matsuoka left his apartment at eight in the evening and arrived at half past eight on East Road, where the restaurant was located. He hid himself in the shadows of the building and called Fukuda's cell phone. He invited the man out for drinks. Fukuda turned him down, just as he expected.

"I'm at a farewell party today. I told you about it, remember?" he said over loud chatter in the background.

"What time's it gonna end?"

"In about thirty minutes, I think? Hey, where are you right now?"

"Wait—my reception's really choppy. I can't really hear—hello?—what the—" Matsuoka hung up, pretending he couldn't hear the other end. When Fukuda called back, he turned his phone off, intending not to pick up.

Matsuoka slowly approached the restaurant, secured a spot a short distance away, and waited for the members of the farewell party to come out. Less than fifteen minutes after his arrival, a large group came streaming out of the doors. Matsuoka squinted and spotted a man holding a large bouquet of flowers coming out. It was Hirosue. Fukuda was there, too. When all of the farewell party members had gathered in front of the restaurant, Matsuoka raised his chin and squared his shoulders. He slowly went up to the man who had his back turned and gently took his arm.

Hirosue turned around to see Matsuoka standing behind him, and dropped his bouquet in surprise. A young worker standing in front of him picked it up hastily.

"Are you alright, Mr. Hirosue?"

A buzz erupted within the group as all eyes turned to them. Matsuoka dragged Hirosue away from the circle.

"Ms. Eto, what are you doing here?" Hirosue was looking at him as if he couldn't believe himself. Matsuoka sidled up and rubbed against him like a cat. Just that was enough to make Hirosue freeze up nervously. Matsuoka took the man's trembling hand and wrote on his palm.

'I was just passing by.'

He glanced at the circle of people they had left behind. Everyone was looking this way with avid interest. Matsuoka flashed a smile at the group. A few men responded with their own goofy grins.

'Are you free to go somewhere with me right now?' Matsuoka wrote, and tightened his arm around Hirosue's.

"Oh—um, it was my farewell party today. I got, um, transferred... oh, but now the party's over. Right." He was a bumbling mess. Hirosue was clearly very flustered. "I think I can go. Let me give my thanks to everyone one last time."

As the man made to go back to the group, Matsuoka squeezed his hand. Hirosue hesitated a little, but squeezed his hand back, and led Matsuoka back to the group with him.

"Thanks for, um, doing this for me today," he addressed the group. "I'll do my best at my new workplace, so if you're ever around Koishikawa Lab, please drop by to say hello."

Everyone was busy gawking, not at Hirosue, but at Matsuoka, who was beside him. Matsuoka met their interested gazes with a friendly smile, and stared meaningfully at Hirosue as he spoke, as if to imply that their relationship was something special.

"I'll be taking my leave here. Thank you for everything," Hirosue concluded. The young man

beside him who had picked up the bouquet spoke up.

"Um—!" he stammered. "Mr. Hirosue, is she your girlfriend?"

Matsuoka sensed Hirosue opening his mouth to say no, and gently pressed his right hand against the man's lips. He flashed a smile at the group. A buzz simultaneously rippled through the crowd.

"She's *so* pretty. I don't think I've ever seen a person this beautiful before," a female worker sighed as she gazed at Matsuoka, her eyelids bright blue from her excessive eyeshadow.

"So tall and fair... she's like a model."

Even the male workers joined in to bombard Matsuoka with questions.

"Where did you meet Mr. Hirosue?"

"How long have you been dating?"

More and more questions required him to give an answer. Matsuoka wore a flustered expression on his face and quietly buried his face in Hirosue's shoulder. Instant silence fell across the group.

Matsuoka grasped Hirosue's arm as if to hurry him, and looked intently into his eyes. Hirosue seemed to get his nonverbal message.

"I think she's in a rush. Excuse us."

No one tried to stop Hirosue. The two of them held hands as they walked. They heard footsteps chasing them, and they turned around to see the young man who had been standing with Hirosue earlier, holding the bouquet of flowers.

"You forgot this."

For some reason, the bouquet was offered to Matsuoka. He accepted the flowers, and gave the man the most radiant smile he could. That was enough to make the young man turn beet red.

In the distance, he could see Fukuda standing alone, looking stunned. *Serves you right*, Matsuoka spat inwardly at the idiotic look on the man's face.

Tomorrow, General Affairs would probably be abuzz with talk of Hirosue's girlfriend. Matsuoka had wanted to get back at Fukuda for all the cruel things he said—that was the root of his crossdressing today. And its effects were impressive.

Go on and think I'm beautiful, he thought in vengeance. *And I hope it makes you even a little jealous of Hirosue for having such a beautiful girlfriend.*

Once they turned the corner and were cut off from the group behind him, Matsuoka suddenly felt sheepish that they were holding hands. He let his hand go limp, but Hirosue still didn't let go.

"Where do you want to go?" Hirosue stopped and peered into Matsuoka's face. There were plenty of places to go drinking since they were in a shopping district, but Matsuoka deliberately chose a 24-hour coffee shop. Although he had been the one to invite Hirosue out, he wanted to avoid getting into any more of an intimate situation.

Most of the other customers in the coffee shop looked ten years younger than them, and it felt like they didn't belong. Despite having chosen a seat in the back around other unoccupied tables, they were still surrounded by noise.

Matsuoka peered into the bouquet while Hirosue went to get coffee. It smelled like the faint, gentle fragrance of flowers. He buried his nose in the bouquet and sniffed like a dog until Hirosue

came back and chuckled at him.

"Please keep those flowers."

Matsuoka stared back at him, unable to say yes, and Hirosue grinned.

"You don't have to feel bad. The kind wishes I've gotten from everyone is enough. Please put the flowers in your room, Ms. Yoko."

Matsuoka personally didn't have much use for the flowers, but he felt like Hirosue strongly wanted to give them to him, so he nodded.

Matsuoka placed the flowers on the seat beside him, and took a sip of coffee. He wondered why he was feeling so hungry, and after much thought, realized he hadn't eaten dinner. He'd completely forgotten from being too engrossed in perfecting his makeup.

Hirosue had just eaten at his farewell party, so he was most likely not hungry. Matsuoka thought it might be rude to be the only one eating, but in the end he couldn't win against his empty stomach.

'Do you mind if I eat a little?'

He discreetly handed the memo to Hirosue. The man hastily got to his feet.

"What would you like? I'll get it for you," he said.

'I'll buy it myself. Please don't worry,' Matsuoka wrote and showed him, but the man refused to step down.

"No, I'll buy," he said firmly.

Matsuoka sensed that further argument would probably only make things awkward, so he relented and asked for a hot dog. One wasn't nearly enough, to be truthful, but eating two or three wouldn't be very ladylike. He also decided to be modest since Hirosue was treating him.

Matsuoka absently watched Hirosue's back as the man placed the order at a self-serve counter. Out of the blue, a man approached him to start a conversation.

"Hey," the man said. Matsuoka could tell at first glance that the man was younger than him. He was tall, with brown hair. He was wearing a shirt with a strange pattern, but since it looked good on him, it appeared he had at least some fashion sense.

"Are you alone?"

People often tried to strike up a conversation with Matsuoka when he was in drag. Since Matsuoka was usually walking when it happened, all he had to do was ignore them to shake them off. If they still persisted, he chased them away by telling them he was meeting someone. Matsuoka glanced at Hirosue, who was still at the counter. Matsuoka couldn't speak up because he'd told Hirosue that he couldn't talk. If Hirosue happened to hear him, his lie would be exposed instantly.

"If you're alone, what do you say to some drinks with me? I know a good place."

Matsuoka let the reluctance show on his face, but the man showed no intent of giving up. Matsuoka was about to pull out his memo pad to write that he was with someone when he heard Hirosue's voice.

"Is he your friend?" Matsuoka looked up to see Hirosue with the hot dog on a tray, about to sit down in the seat across.

Guilt crossed the man's face.

"If you're with a guy, you should just say so," he snapped before making his exit. Hirosue

sighed in relief.

"Please. Eat."

The tray was pushed in front of him. Matsuoka inclined his head a little in lieu of thanks and picked up the hot dog. He was famished, no doubt about it, but it was extremely difficult to eat. The reason lay in the man sitting across from him, who was staring at him so intently it was hard not to notice.

The single hot dog was enough to make him full. Matsuoka wiped the mustard off his fingertips with a paper napkin.

"Why were you in town today?" Hirosue asked him, as if he had been waiting for Matsuoka to finish.

'No reason. I had nothing to do,' Matsuoka wrote back.

"You didn't have plans to meet with anyone?"

Matsuoka slowly shook his head.

"Did you find me by coincidence?"

He nodded firmly.

"Why did you act like you were my girlfriend in front of everyone?"

Matsuoka didn't know how to answer him.

'Just because,' he wrote vaguely, and handed the paper to Hirosue.

"You do these things 'just because'? You haven't forgotten that I told you I love you, right?"

Now that it had been pointed out to him, Matsuoka realized and regretted his misleading attitude for the first time. He'd cut off their relationship in a one-sided way, yet on his own whim he was hanging off the man's arm, taking advantage of his kindness. It was no wonder Hirosue was angry.

'I'm sorry,' he wrote, and offered the note to the man. Hirosue read it, then propped his elbows on the table and cradled his head. Matsuoka felt like he'd made the man even angrier by apologizing. He didn't know what to do anymore. But no matter how many times he wrote "I'm sorry" on paper, it would probably make no difference.

Hirosue's attitude made him restless with guilt, and Matsuoka rubbed his knees together under the table many times. If he could, he wished he could just go home right now.

"To tell you the truth, I'm at a loss." Hirosue finally lifted his face. Matsuoka was relieved to see that the expression on his face was not anger.

"I was really happy that you came up to talk to me. When you pretended to be my girlfriend, I felt like I was dreaming."

He took Matsuoka's hands in his on the table, making him flinch.

"How do you feel about me?"

It wasn't a yes or no question, and since both of his hands were being held, he couldn't write anything. Matsuoka could do nothing but stare at the man before him.

"You said you were in love with someone. Are you dating him?"

Matsuoka shook his head. He didn't think deeply about what that meant.

"You're not dating? So your feelings are one-sided, Ms. Eto?"

Since Matsuoka had just said they weren't dating, he had no other choice but to nod now.

"Why don't you tell him your feelings? Someone as beautiful as you would probably have no problem—" Hirosue trailed off and shut his mouth. He wrinkled his brow and stared at the table with a difficult expression.

"Do I have a chance?" His eyes were so serious, they were frightening. "Do I have a chance of you loving me back?"

A torrent of words pelted Matsuoka until he gave an answer.

"Because if you hated me, you would ignore me if you saw me on the street, right? But you didn't. Can I take that as a sign that you have some feelings towards me, even if it's just as a friend?"

Hirosue's grip tightened, and he pressed Matsuoka's fingertips to his forehead as if in prayer.

"I know how you feel. But I don't mind. When you're bored, when you're lonely—call me. In return, I just want you to let me be in love with you, forgive me for wanting to see you. And—" his words continued. "If you get across to the person you love and I become a nuisance to you, please just say so without worrying about me. When that happens, I'll give up on you for sure."

Matsuoka's heart ached as if he were the one who had said it. If he were a girl put into this situation, he would have agreed to date him without a second thought. In fact, if a woman didn't fall for him after such a display of pure love, there was something clearly wrong with her.

Even while Matsuoka was being dragged along by those heated feelings, a faint doubt crossed his heart. They usually only conversed through e-mail. This was their fifth time seeing each other in person. What had made this man love him to this extent? Although they made small talk, Matsuoka had never divulged his honest opinions to Hirosue. But this man was saying he loved him.

Matsuoka knew it was unnatural for him to see Hirosue in a woman's guise. That was precisely why he had avoided it. But now, his desire to know was enough to make him turn a blind eye to the abnormality of this situation. Where did this man's feelings stem from, and how deeply did they run? Matsuoka wanted to see for himself.

They resumed e-mailing each other, but they did not meet again. Hirosue made no mention of wanting to see him, either. Matsuoka's initial reaction to that statement had been to cut ties with him completely, which was probably why Hirosue was reluctant to repeat it again.

One Friday about a month after Hirosue's farewell party, Matsuoka had arrived home to his apartment and was in the middle of exchanging e-mails with Hirosue. Their messages went back and forth like a conversation. Unlike before, Hirosue now confided in Matsuoka about his work. He seemed to be having trouble fitting in at his new workplace. "I'm not mindful enough," he often repeated in his e-mails. But it wasn't a problem of mindfulness; the real problem was probably the overly-specialized laboratory environment. But Matsuoka could not give himself away by revealing he knew the internal affairs of the company. So he had no choice but to button his lip and listen to what Hirosue said. He could tell from the tone of Hirosue's e-mails that the man was placing all the blame on himself for the rocky social conditions with his co-workers. Hirosue's self-reproach seeped through the lines and filled Matsuoka with pain. Matsuoka also found it hard endure the brutally-truthful way he called himself incompetent. If only he could unload some of the blame on others—maybe complain about how his boss seemed to have a stick up his ass—then, perhaps it would take some stress off of

his shoulders. But Hirosue didn't seem like the type to do that. *If he even had a little bit of the thick skin that Fukuda has*, Matsuoka thought in frustration.

The topic of work made Hirosue's e-mails slant further and further into sombre and gloomy territory, so Matsuoka decided to change up the conversation.

'Did you hear it's supposed to be sunny tomorrow?' he wrote.

'Do you have any plans?' was Hirosue's reply.

'I'll probably just laze around at home,' Matsuoka answered. The next e-mail came after some time.

'Then would you like to go out somewhere with me?'

Matsuoka instantly regretted it. It would sound too deliberate now if he said, 'I'm sorry, I suddenly remembered I had an errand. I can't go out tomorrow,' when he had just proclaimed himself free.

Matsuoka agonized over his decision. If he said no now, he felt like he would hurt the man. But meeting him in drag would be unnatural. After thinking and thinking and thinking some more, he finally sent a reply.

'Where will you take me?'

He sent the e-mail with a concrete resolve and mental preparation to meet Hirosue again.

Less than a minute later, he received a giddy reply.

'Where would you like to go? Do you have any requests?'

'I'll leave it up to you, Mr. Hirosue,' he replied.

After e-mailing him good night, Matusoka thought hard. They had agreed to meet at ten o'clock in the morning. He would probably be with Hirosue until evening. It was going to be his first time spending such a long stretch of the day in crossdressed form with Hirosue. Matsuoka had his fears about accidentally using his voice, or about his wig falling off, but it was no use thinking of that stuff now.

Matsuoka banished the elements of anxiety from his mind and climbed into bed early. Sleep was critical to healthy-looking skin. He simply could not let himself be seen if his makeup didn't blend with his skin properly.

The weather forecast betrayed them spectacularly the next day, bestowing them with a steady drizzle since morning. Matsuoka and Hirosue stood stunned in front of the gates of the enormous amusement park. Matsuoka had noticed how empty the train to the park had been despite it being a Saturday, and had also found it strange that there were so few people heading towards the gates. But he had assumed it was because of the rain.

He hadn't even imagined that the park would be closed on Saturdays. Matsuoka was surprised, but Hirosue seemed to be even more shocked. As soon as he saw the "Park Closed" sign, he froze on the spot and stopped moving altogether.

"I'm sorry. I should have looked it up beforehand," he apologized in such a barely audible whisper that Matsuoka hastily scribbled, 'It's alright. Don't worry about it,' on a note. On their way back to the station directly connected to the amusement park, Hirosue kept his head down and barely

spoke. When he opened his mouth, all that came out were words of apology. It was unbearable to see Hirosue swamped with such self-loathing.

They had talked about so many things on the train ride here, but the ride back was silent. Matsuoka thought of any way he might lift Hirosue's spirits.

'Let's play King.' Matsuoka showed him the note, and Hirosue lifted his face. *'We'll play rock-paper-scissors, and the winner gets to be King for the day. The King's commands are absolute, and you have to obey them no matter what.'*

Hirosue finally smiled a little.

"If I won I'd be King, but if you won I guess you would be Queen."

Matsuoka smiled, closed his right hand into a loose fist and raised it to chest-level.

"Are we playing already?"

When Matsuoka nodded, Hirosue closed his right hand in the same way. On the same beat, they revealed their hands on one, two, three. Matsuoka won.

"What shall I do for you, Your Majesty?" Hirosue said jokingly.

'When we get back to the station, I want to eat pasta. I know a good place – can we go there?' Matsuoka wrote.

"As you wish, Your Majesty." Hirosue bowed his head humbly.

'And after lunch, let's go to a hair salon.'

Hirosue read the note. "A hair salon?" he echoed. Matsuoka only smiled and didn't say any more.

Hirosue looked flustered, but Matsuoka was rather enjoying himself. After they dined on pasta, Matsuoka took Hirosue to a stylish salon. He worried about whether they could get a seat without an appointment, but apparently there had been a cancellation due to the rain. They ended up being able to secure an appointment for a haircut and colour.

Matsuoka gave a light flutter of his right hand as Hirosue was hauled off to the shampoo station with a dubious look on his face. While the man was getting shampooed, Matsuoka chose a haircut from the catalogue and decided on a colour. He picked a dark brown that wasn't too flashy, and a haircut that was on the shorter side, with airy ends which allowed for movement.

While Hirosue was getting his hair cut and dyed, Matsuoka passed the time flipping through magazines, gazing at the rain outside, and observing Hirosue's anxious face as he sat before the mirror. It took about an hour and a half until everything was finished. Hirosue's professionally-styled hair was voluminous but clean-cut, and made him look about fifty-percent better-looking.

Matsuoka knew his eyes hadn't deceived him. He had figured the man would look decent as long as he did something with his hair, and he had been right. They had even done Hirosue's eyebrows, which made him laugh.

When Hirosue fretted about payment, Matsuoka handed him a note that said, 'I'm the Queen today, so don't you worry about it,' and ushered him along to their next destination. They arrived at a shopping mall, where Matsuoka entered every single store that lined it, and made the most of window shopping.

They entered a glasses store even though both of them had good vision. They fooled around and tried numerous pairs of glasses, heedless of the unimpressed look on the salesperson's face. A pair of sleek, thin-framed glasses looked astonishingly good on Hirosue. The glasses alone were enough to give him the aura of a fashion-savvy man. Matsuoka wondered if he wouldn't buy them, even just as an accessory, but Hirosue did not spend his money on such trifles.

Next, they entered a brand-name shop that specialized in men's apparel. Matsuoka shopped from this store a lot, since they were surprisingly affordable and had a good selection of casual wear.

In fact, one thing had been on his mind since this morning, and that was Hirosue's clothes. A suit made every man look presentable, with personal clothes that was not so. There wasn't a more obvious way to display your tastes than through the clothes you wore when off work. Hirosue's taste, to put it mildly, was appalling. His thick checkered shirt was faded and wrinkled, and the T-shirt he wore underneath was worn out. On top of that, his beige cotton pants had pleats in the front and back, creating a shapeless silhouette that was murderously unappealing. Matsuoka had always wondered why Hirosue wore trousers aimed at middle-aged men who wanted to hide their figures when he was thin enough to pull off a slim pair. Matsuoka took various shirts and jackets and held them up to Hirosue's chest like he would a mannequin. Soon, he found a khaki-coloured zip-up jacket that was perfect for the season.

It looked so good he almost wanted one for himself, and he felt like it would look good on Hirosue, too. Matsuoka chose the jacket and a dark pair of jeans and led the man by the hand to the fitting rooms.

"Would you like to try those on?" an associate asked.

"Um," mumbled the man incoherently. Matsuoka handed him the clothes he had chosen and flashed him a smile.

"Is it okay if I just see how they look on me?" Hirosue asked meekly. The associate gave him an ear-to-ear grin.

"Please," he said.

Hirosue came out of the fitting room about three minutes later. Since he was tall to begin with, his legs looked longer when he wore a simple pair of denims. They went well with the jacket, and it gave him a polished air.

"It looks *very* nice on you," the associate enthused, seizing his chance to shower him with compliments. Hirosue didn't seem to think it was too bad, either.

"I don't own any jeans, actually, and this is my first time wearing this type of jacket."

"If you don't own anything like this, I'd urge you to take this opportunity to add to your wardrobe. You can wear jeans year-round, and you'll be able to wear this jacket across many seasons, except the middle of winter and the heat of the summer."

Hirosue looked at Matsuoka. "How do I look?"

'*Fabulous*,' he wrote on the man's hand. Hirosue's face turned brick red as he watched Matsuoka write.

"You like it?"

Matsuoka nodded enthusiastically.

"Then I'll take the set, please."

"Thank you," the sales associate said with a grin, and bowed his head deeply. Matsuoka pulled Hirosue back as he headed towards the fitting rooms again. The man cocked his head at him, and Matsuoka wrote, *'Keep them on for our date.'*

They put Hirosue's own clothes in the store's paper bag and left the shop. Before, when they walked side by side, people had usually turned around to look at Matsuoka. Now, he could sense people staring at Hirosue as well. It was understandable: Hirosue now looked unbelievably refined and handsome. The display windows caught their reflections like mirrors. They seemed like a real couple when they were walking like this.

They reached the end of the shopping mall they had frolicked through. The rain stubbornly refused to let up, and since they wanted to avoid the hassle of walking through it, they entered a nearby building instead. It contained brand-name shops for female apparel, and on the second floor they found a comfortable-looking cafe.

They chose a seat by the window and sat down across from each other. Hirosue let out a breath.

'I'm sorry for dragging you around like that. You must be tired.' Matsuoka gently handed him the note. Hirosue shook his head.

"No, I'm enjoying myself," he said, and gave him a smile. "I was able to buy the kind of clothes I'd usually never wear. I felt like I was discovering a new side to me. It was interesting."

Matsuoka wished today would inspire Hirosue to take an interest in fashion. Women would flock to him, and he would have an easier time forgetting about Matsuoka. But on the other hand, Matsuoka felt reluctant to hand Hirosue over to a girl for nothing when he had put in so much of his effort into making this man handsome.

He heard a child's voice, and glanced over to see a girl about three years old tottering down the aisle with an ice cream cone in hand. She looked half-Japanese: her light brown hair and fair skin gave her a doll-like appearance.

She was so adorable, she turned the heads of many around her. Matsuoka also gazed at her absently. When the girl reached their table, she dropped a pink coin purse with metal clasps which had been slung across her shoulder. She bent down to pick it up, and before Matsuoka could voice a warning, she tumbled face forward on the floor, leaving a smear of ice cream below the knee of Hirosue's brand-new jeans.

The little girl sat up. Her face crumpled into a grimace before she burst into loud tears. Unsure of what to do, Matsuoka took a sweeping glance around him, looking for her mother.

"Don't cry, it'll be alright." Hirosue stood up from his seat, squatted down in front of the girl and patted her head. When she wouldn't stop crying, he scooped her up in a familiar fashion.

"Alrighty, where's your mommy?" he murmured as he gazed at his surroundings. The young mother finally appeared. She bowed apologetically to him and took the child with her. After they were out of sight, Hirosue wiped the hem of his pants with a warm wet towel. His jacket was also soiled from the girl's sticky fingers clinging to his chest.

As for the man himself, he didn't seem to mind the stain.

"She was cute, wasn't she?" he reflected mildly. He didn't seem to notice the stain on his chest. Too impatient to tell him in writing, Matsuoka got up from his chair and rubbed at Hirosue's jacket

with his own wet cloth.

Once the stain had somewhat come off, he looked up to see Hirosue blushing bright red. *All I did was get close to him and he's like this. How innocent,* Matsuoka thought idly, then slid back into his seat across.

"Thank you," Hirosue smiled, his face still red.

'You're good with kids,' Matsuoka wrote and showed him.

"Ah, well," Hirosue said, raking the back of his freshly-barbered head. "My older brother's child is around that age. I always play with him when I go back to my parents' place. Children are so innocent at that age, so it's heartwarming just to spend time with them."

'You're a kind man, Mr. Hirosue.'

After reading the note, Hirosue laughed bitterly in self-scorn.

"I'm actually not at all."

Matsuoka hadn't meant to tease him; he honestly did feel that way. Confused at Hirosue's unexpected response, Matsuoka added to his note and handed it back.

'You helped me that time, too.'

Hirosue looked at the note and turned his face downwards.

"I only lent you my shoes. And you returned my money."

'But you were the only one who approached me that time, Mr. Hirosue.'

The man across from him lapsed into silence. Never before did Matsuoka regret his pretence of being mute as much as he did now. If only he could speak—then, he would be able to urge the man on and carry their conversation at a brisker tempo.

"I only approached you the second time I saw you."

I know that already. You don't have to tell me.

"The first time I saw you, I couldn't bring myself to go up to you. I was with people from my work. They called you 'some weird lady' and I couldn't argue against them. I pretended not to see you. But it kept nagging at me, so I came back alone. But still, it took me a long time until I could talk to you."

Hirosue looked at Matsuoka.

"A kind person in the real sense would probably have approached you the first time he saw you. He wouldn't have had second thoughts or hesitated like I did. I'm actually not a kind person at all."

Matsuoka knew what the man was trying to say. But it rankled him for reasons he didn't know.

'Who are you trying to be? God?'

Hirosue looked surprised at the contents of the note.

"God...?"

'Aren't you? Because what you did was perfectly normal. If a strange woman you knew nothing about was sitting on the ground and you didn't approach her because you didn't want to get involved in trouble, that's perfectly normal. If our positions were reversed, I would have ignored you. I would have had nothing to do with you.'

It was incredibly frustrating to have to write everything down when Matsuoka knew that, in spoken words, he would have gotten across immediately.

'No one likes hassles. You were aware of that, but you still came up to me. That's why I was so touched. Whether you did it earlier or later is nothing to beat yourself up about. It's so maddening to hear you talk like that. It makes you seem fake.'

Hirosue's face tensed up before his eyes as he read the note.

'I'm guilty of lying, of being mean to people. If I happen upon something troublesome, I'll ignore it. Will you look down on me for being like that?'

"I didn't mean..."

Matsuoka shook his head.

'Why don't you be more honest? If you like something, or if you hate something, just say so. That's part of being human. Why don't you accept that?'

Hirosue hung his head. Watching the man bow his head in shame, Matsuoka found himself wondering why he was so riled up. Hirosue was not guilty at all. In fact, the man had helped him, and his very kindness was what was making him feel guilty right now. What business did Matsuoka—a stranger—have to reprimand him about it? Hirosue had every right to think it unfair.

A little while after their conversation lapsed, the waitress approached them and asked them if she could take the cups away. The coffee shop was starting to get crowded.

"Should we leave?" Hirosue said to him, and Matsuoka nodded.

They left the coffee shop and paused at the exit of the shopping mall. They had no further plans from here.

"Let's call it a day, then?" Hirosue suggested gloomily. Matsuoka could do nothing but nod. They opened their umbrellas and walked in the rain. As he watched the man from behind, Matsuoka felt frustration nibbling at his whole body. Hirosue was kind, considerate man with firm morals, innocence, and sincerity. Matsuoka knew that. Then, what had caused him be so harsh to that man? He pondered over the roots of his actions.

To his colleague, Fukuda, for example, he barely said half of what he really thought. If he spoke the truth to a man like him who was self-centred, unsympathetic, and twisted everything to suit his own purposes, their friendship would never work out. The reality was that, as long as you knew the trick to getting along, you could keep up endless superficial relations with any kind of prick.

The words that Matsuoka had written on his earlier notes were his honest thoughts. Those feelings were deeper than simply "like" and "dislike", and Matsuoka had been compelled to put them into words.

When they arrived at the station, they bought tickets and found out they were going in total opposite directions. Once they descended the stairs going underground, Hirosue would take the stairs in the far end to get on his side, and Matsuoka would take the stairs closer to them to go in his direction. Hirosue paused before the stairs going down to their respective platforms.

"Thank you for coming out with me today. Sorry I made a mess of it right from the beginning."

If Matsuoka hadn't unleashed a one-sided attack on the man, perhaps this would have ended as a fun date. Hirosue's eyes remained fixed on his feet and he avoided meeting Matsuoka's gaze. From his attitude, he appeared to think Matsuoka hated him now. He had to straighten out the misunderstanding before they parted, at least, or else he felt like the man would go home and agonize about it endlessly.

'I like people who are kind.'

The man stared at the note that Matsuoka had passed him. Matsuoka held out another one in his line of sight.

'And I like people who strive to be kind.'

Hirosue lifted his face and smiled weakly. His eyes were watery, like he was on the verge of tears. At his steady gaze, Matsuoka felt his heart stir.

"I can't drive." With the abrupt statement, the man clasped both of Matsuoka's hands tightly. "When I was in university, I caused an accident. I hit a high-school student riding a bike. Fortunately that student wasn't hurt badly, but ever since then I've been too afraid to drive. It scared me how easy it was to hurt others, that I'd caused harm—since then, I just haven't been able to drive a car."

Matsuoka didn't know what Hirosue was trying to get at.

"I'm a cowardly, shameful guy. I know really well that I am. I have no special hobbies, I'm not athletic, and I'm not good at talking to people. All the women I've dated before have always told me I was boring."

That wasn't Hirosue's fault; his mistake was falling in love with the kind of women who would say that. —Matsuoka wished he could say so, but he couldn't.

"That's why—since you can't talk, I figured you wouldn't mind if I wasn't very good at conversation," he blurted.

The man's bare confession took Matsuoka by surprise.

"You're free to think of me as a cruel man. But I will still tell you the truth."

His grip tightened around Matsuoka's hands so fiercely it hurt.

"Even with your speech handicap, you're still a cheerful person, and you're not afraid of giving your honest opinions. You're a grounded, mature woman. And you're strong—completely different from me."

Matsuoka gulped loudly. He couldn't avert his gaze from the man's earnest eyes.

"I love you."

For some reason, the confession made him feel dizzy.

"It's probably unwanted trouble for you, but I still want to say it. I love you."

Matsuoka's heart was racing. Although he knew those words were meant for Yoko Eto, he was still overcome with a strange feeling. He had been confessed to once before, but right now it was different. Today, it was completely different.

"I don't want to let you go home," Hirosue said in a strained voice. "I don't want anyone else to see you or touch you. I want to take you home and cherish you, and make you mine. Only mine."

In the next moment, he was being drawn into an embrace. He could smell hair product from the nape of the man's neck.

"Ms. Eto."

He looked up as his name was called. He sensed a kiss coming, but he didn't try to avoid it. His brain wasn't functioning enough to tell him to flee. The man's dry lips merely brushed against his in a tranquil, gentle kiss. Hirosue drew away once, then lovingly stroked Matsuoka's cheek before kissing him again.

Matsuoka's first kiss in a year felt good, to be truthful. As he basked in being in Hirosue's arms,

he was violently brought back to reality when he felt fingers running through his hair. His wig shifted backwards a little.

Matsuoka tore the man off of him with as much strength as he could muster, and flew down the stairs. He wanted to fix his skewed wig, but he didn't have a mirror. Hirosue was chasing him from behind, though he wished the man would leave him alone—

"Don't run away, Ms. Yoko."

He couldn't run very quickly in heels. Finally, around halfway down the platform, he was caught.

"What I did was totally out of the blue. I understand if you're angry. I'm sorry."

Matsuoka looked down so the man wouldn't see his shifted hairline.

"But I really do love you."

I get it. Just leave me alone today. No matter how much effort Matsuoka exerted to pry the Hirosue's hands off of him, he was no match for a man's serious strength.

He could sense the train coming from far away. Matsuoka made up his mind and lifted his face decisively. He gazed intently at the pitiful man's face, quietly drew up to him, and kissed his dry, gentle lips. The man flinched, and his grip on Matsuoka's hands loosened.

As the man stood in stunned silence, Matsuoka dipped his head in a slight bow, shook off the hands that held his and jumped onto the train behind him. The man did not come after him. He only stood and stared in dumb shock at Matsuoka as the train took him further and further away.

As soon as he was left alone on the train, Matsuoka felt a wave of embarrassment come over him. Granted, he was caught up in the moment, but he thought he would never see the day when he'd be kissing someone in a public place like a station platform. Some people here probably witnessed the scene as well. Unable to bear the awkwardness, Matsuoka fled two train cars to the front.

His cheeks were strangely hot and his heart fluttered as he recalled the kiss. He felt like he was going insane, and it made him panic. Eventually he heard his ring tone signalling the arrival of a message. It was definitely from Hirosue. He was afraid to read it, yet couldn't wait to; with these inexplicable, nebulous feelings swirling in his heart, he took out his cell phone.

'I want to see your face.'

It wasn't an apology, or even an excuse. They were Hirosue's honest feelings. Matsuoka was unsure of how to reply, and he ended up arriving at his apartment without sending anything back. Not feeling up to doing anything, he sat on the sofa in the living room and absently stared at the wall.

The closed theme park, their King Game, their argument in the cafe, their bold kiss at the station—all of these things blended together as he remembered them over and over again. It made him restless, but in no way was it unpleasant. In fact, it was the opposite.

He knew this feeling—when someone was persistently on his mind and refused to leave his thoughts, making him happy, or suddenly sad, making his emotions precariously unstable....

Even if he were to go with the theory that this was love, there was still the fact that they were both men. Matsuoka smiled wryly. Being confessed to so many times had probably given him a mistaken impression. It had to be a mistaken impression, or else there was no way to explain the emotions he felt.

His cell phone rang from an incoming message, and Matsuoka flinched so violently he

surprised himself. He hastily opened it.

'You can say anything. Please just give me an answer.'

He could feel the tension through the e-mail. This man had never before sent two e-mails in a row without receiving a reply. The laws of their conversations were beginning to crumble. Matsuoka wanted to answer, but he had no idea what to write, or how. It wasn't like he could say, 'I'm actually a man, and Yoko Eto does not exist. The person to whom you just made that spectacular confession of love is actually a man.' Absolutely no way. As Matsuoka sat with folded arms in front of his cell phone, thinking hard, a third e-mail arrived.

'I'm almost dying from regret.'

The pleading man was uncontrollably adorable. No other words could describe what he felt now.

'Today...'

Matsuoka typed that much, then erased it. He wrote 'Today' again, and it took him thirty minutes to write just a few lines of text.

'Today, I was caught by surprise a little, but it was fun. Good night.'

After sending the e-mail, he felt like he had just done something irrevocable. But he had not lied in the words he had written.

Even after he had showered, taken his makeup off, and stepped completely out of a woman's world, he still felt it lingering about him. He kept subconsciously touching his lips over and over. He was certainly going crazy.

Something was still bothering him, and he felt like he knew why, yet he felt like he didn't. Matsuoka dealt with it by going to bed early. But he was too excited to sleep, and he tossed and turned several times.

Shallow sleep finally descended on Matsuoka, bringing him a strange dream along with it. All he was doing was standing face-to-face with Hirosue. They weren't talking, just standing. Matsuoka was in male form, but he was still aware of the love and desire Hirosue harboured for him.

He didn't think it disturbing. A thought randomly entered his head—he wondered if he was going to have sex with this man. *If he said he wanted to, would I?*

He did feel like he wanted to see what kind of body Hirosue had. His broad chest had been very comforting when he was embraced earlier.

—I bet he's gentle with sex, too. Even in his dream, Matsuoka was almost sure of it.

When Hirosue said he wanted to meet again, Matsuoka refused. He knew it was something he shouldn't do. But every day, he continued to receive giddy, fervent e-mails from Hirosue. Every time he read them, he felt a searing yearning in his heart. It was like he was falling in love, too. *Is it love? No; they're just misguided feelings.* The two thoughts alternately flitted through his heart. When it came down to it, even Matsuoka himself could not tell which one was correct.

On the morning exactly three weeks after their date, Matsuoka got an e-mail from Hirosue after his wake-up call.

'I'll be waiting at the clock tower in front of Shimoda Station on the Hiwasa subway line at seven o'clock

this evening. If you don't want to come, you don't have to. But I have to take some sort of action, or else I can't sit still.'

For the whole day, even at work, Matsuoka's mind was on Hirosue's e-mail. He didn't intend to go, but if he didn't, Hirosue would probably keep waiting in front of the station. The thought of it pained him. That was why he had written an e-mail back.

'I have an errand to run today, so I won't be able to go.'

If he told Hirosue it was an errand, he figured the man wouldn't bother waiting, either. He had sent the e-mail at six o'clock in the evening, before their meeting time.

Matsuoka ate out for dinner, and boarded the train. He waited and waited, but there was no reply from Hirosue. Feeling a sense of foreboding, Matsuoka got off at Shimoda Station. It was seven-thirty.

He had guessed right: Hirosue was standing before the clock tower in front of the station. Matsuoka hid himself in the shadows and typed an e-mail.

'I'm having dinner with a friend right now. I'm sorry I couldn't meet you today. I'll e-mail you again when I get home.'

After he sent it, there was a short time lag before he saw Hirosue reach into his suit pocket to pull out his cell phone. Surely this was enough to make the man give up and go home. However, even after reading the e-mail, Hirosue did not move from the front of the clock tower.

He had told the man he couldn't go. He'd sent e-mails twice. Why was he still waiting? Matsuoka rapped his heel against the pavement in frustration.

If this is what it's come to, maybe I should just go up to him right now. Right here, right now, I'll tell that guy: Yoko Eto doesn't exist. She was me. That way, I'll finally get a load off my chest. I don't care if he thinks I'm a crossdressing pervert.

Matsuoka exited the station and slowly approached Hirosue at the clock tower. The man glanced at him once, but quickly looked at his feet again. Matsuoka had meant to stand face-to-face with the man, but his courage failed him at the last minute. He ended walking around to the opposite side, pretending to wait for someone as well.

He told himself he was only waiting for the right timing to go up to him. He brooded seriously over whether his first words would be "good evening" or "let me introduce myself", but in the back of his mind he knew he was only doing it to buy himself time.

Just go home already. Yoko Eto isn't coming. He sent mental messages to the man over and over again from behind the clock tower, but the shadow behind him did not budge.

A droplet hit his cheek. It was rain. As he looked up at the sky, it began to rain harder. The people around him naturally quickened their steps. Matsuoka made a hurried run towards the station entrance.

Hirosue did not move from the clock tower. Even when the rain started coming down in torrents, he still stood there looking at his feet. The man didn't deliberately have to wait in a spot that would get him wet. One could still see the clock tower and its surroundings from the sheltered station entrance. But the man did not move.

As much as he wanted to, Matsuoka couldn't grab the man's hand and take him out of the rain, because he wasn't dressed as a woman. He wasn't Yoko Eto.

Don't let me see you like that, he thought. His chest throbbed painfully, and he felt like he was being crushed by guilt, or by some feeling he couldn't put a name to.

'Please just go home.' He sent the e-mail. After a short while, the man suddenly sprang into motion and started glancing around in a panic. His agitation was almost pitiful as he walked around the clock tower—round and round, over and over again, like a dog. After thirty minutes of that, Hirosue finally came into the station. He was soaked so thoroughly he was a mild public nuisance. He walked right past Matsuoka, his downcast face pale and bloodless, his appearance that of a dead man.

Once Hirosue was out of sight, Matsuoka wept a little. *Maybe I've actually become attached to this clumsy, tactless man*, he thought. *Maybe I've actually fallen in love with him.*

Matsuoka walked in the pouring rain without even opening an umbrella. He didn't bother running, which must have looked strange to the passersby, for he could clearly feel their eyes on him.

The interested gazes of those around him didn't bother him at all. He knew that putting himself in the same drenched situation as Hirosue wouldn't do anything, but he felt so lowly of himself that he couldn't let himself be otherwise.

By the time he reached his apartment, the rain had washed away his body heat, and he was shivering. He put his cell phone, which was powered off, onto the table, and shut himself in the bathroom.

Even inside the bath, his head hung low. He thought over and over of the man who had been soaked in the rain. He thought hard. What could he have done? Was there something else he could have done back there?

Hirosue had heedlessly waited despite Matsuoka telling him he couldn't go. Wasn't this partly Hirosue's fault, too? But of course, there was no answer, and Matsuoka was still feeling depressed when he got out of the bath. He towelled his hair as he returned to the living room, where "it" elbowed its way into his vision. He had turned the power off in avoidance. It was proof that he was running away from the problem.

It's not my fault, Matsuoka told himself as he picked up his cell phone. When he turned the power on, an e-mail was waiting from Hirosue, as he expected.

'If you came, why didn't you show yourself to me?'

He had told the man he couldn't go. Hirosue was the one who had chosen to wait anyway, and Matsuoka felt like he had no right to be blamed for that.

'If I'm a nuisance, and you don't want to see me anymore, then please tell me outright. If you tell me you hate me, I'll never e-mail you again.'

His choices were laid out before him. Continue or quit. *I should just say I hate him and send it off. Then, Hirosue would keep his promise and never e-mail me again.*

Even if his relationship with Hirosue ended here, it was just a matter of facing him again as Yosuke Matsuoka.

But Matsuoka didn't hate the man, and he knew he would hurt him by saying so, so he lied and wrote in the e-mail that he couldn't forget about the person he loved. He tried to press "send", but hesitated. If he sent this e-mail, this could really be the end. The knowledge made him waver, and in

the end his indecision prevented him from sending it.

Matsuoka was becoming more and more unsure: was he dragging this romance along for Hirose's sake, or for his own?

The shopping district was bustling on weekdays, but today the streets and footsteps of the people seemed noisier and more restless than usual. Perhaps it was because they had passed mid-December and were now approaching the end of the year.

It was a ten-minute walk from the office to the *izakaya*. He had kept both hands in his coat pockets, but by the time he arrived, his fingertips were chilled to the bone.

Matsuoka ducked through the navy-blue half-curtains of the restaurant at past eight in the evening, and was met with a satisfying "Welcome, come on in!"

"Good evening," he answered with an amiable expression, and let his gaze rove around the restaurant. It was quite crowded inside, but "he" was nowhere to be seen again today.

A sigh spilled from his lips with a feeling of disappointment. He couldn't just turn around and walk back out because the man wasn't here, so he took off his coat and sat at the only counter seat that was open. He chose a random assortment of snack foods and quietly drank beer.

He came here almost every day, but he had yet to see the man even once. Most likely his change of workplace had made it harder for him to frequent this restaurant. But Matsuoka couldn't think of any other point of contact with Hirose other than this *izakaya*. If it was before Hirose was transferred, he might have worked something out through Fukuda, who was in the same department. But now Hirose worked in a laboratory that was far away and had no contact with the sales department. In the end, the only strategy Matsuoka could come up with was simply waiting here for him so he could start a conversation.

Every time the restaurant's sliding door opened, he found his gaze darting towards it like a knee-jerk reaction.

"Are you waiting for someone?" asked the ageing female manager in her sixties. She offered him a serving of deep-fried silver-stripe round herring with a smile.

"Not really," he said as he took the plate from her. The fried fish was flavourful and delicious. He heard the door rattling open again, but this time he didn't turn around. He was weary of being disappointed so many times.

'If I'm a nuisance, I want you to say so'—the e-mail from Hirose on that rainy day was his last. It had been two weeks since then, but he had still not heard from the man. Matsuoka's reply had also been left unsent.

As long as Matsuoka refrained from contacting the man, Hirose and Yoko Eto's relationship would eventually fade out by itself. This was precisely his chance to get to know the man as himself, as Yosuke Matsuoka—but there was no way to meet him in person. With Yoko Eto, it would only have taken one e-mail to see him. It was irritating—both the fact itself and the fact that he was thinking this way.

"Could I have *miso* soup with blood clams, grilled rice balls, and seared moray eel, please?" Matsuoka's heart stopped. He almost dropped his beer glass at hearing the voice so close by.

He was sitting there on the far end of the counter, with two guests between them. The seat had been empty until moments ago.

"It's been a long time, hasn't it, Mr. Hirose?" the owner of the restaurant said to him. Hirose propped his elbows up on the counter and smiled in a tired way.

"I was transferred recently. My new workplace is pretty far, and I haven't been able to make it here much. I came here today because I happened to have business with headquarters, and then I started craving your fish, mister."

"It must be tough being an office worker," the owner sighed.

"I think everyone has a tough time, regardless of where they work. —Could I get some hot sake, please?"

Hirose was pouring himself sake to go with the appetizers. The man Matsuoka had longingly waited for was right beside him, yet he couldn't muster the courage to talk to him. He felt powerless and irritated. If their seats were beside each other, at least, he would be able to casually turn and say, "Hey, aren't we from the same company?"—but they weren't. The two men who formed a barrier between him and Hirose were infuriating.

"Mr. Hirose, it really has been a while," said the female manager as she placed the *miso* soup and rice balls in front of Hirose. "We haven't seen much of you, have we? Last time, you had a very pretty girl with you, so both my husband and I were talking about how you probably don't eat out anymore because she cooks for you."

Hirose gave a rueful smile. "She dumped me," he said.

"My, I'm so sorry," said the manager, lowering her eyes.

"You don't need to feel bad. She was really beautiful and kind. I didn't deserve someone like her."

"You'll find someone else soon," the manager consoled him. *I didn't really dump him*, Matsuoka mentally said as an excuse, but he couldn't deny that their relationship was all but over.

The restaurant filled up and became crowded and noisy before he could find a chance to talk to Hirose. It was getting harder to hear people's voices.

"It's almost Christmas, isn't it," said the female manager, beginning a conversation with the customer beside Hirose. "My grandchildren are twins, both born on December 24th. We thought we could get away with giving them birthday and Christmas gifts together, but they insisted on getting separate presents for each occasion. And since they're twins, you have two presents times two. You can imagine how hard it is."

As the manager sighed in resignation, Hirose spoke up from beside her.

"My birthday's on the 24th, too."

The manager turned around.

"What a coincidence," she said, blinking in surprise.

"When I was a kid, I couldn't stand having them combined into one celebration. Normally, you'd get separate cakes for your birthday and Christmas, but I would only get one. When you're a kid, these kinds of things are a huge deal."

"Oh, I know. My grandchildren were saying the same thing."

The conversation between Hirose, the customer beside him, and the manager gained

momentum, and although Matsuoka continued to look out for a chance, he was unable to insert himself into their conversation. Before he could initiate any action, Hirose asked for the bill, got up, and walked towards the cash register.

After paying for his meal, Hirose smiled at the manager, said "It was delicious," then walked out of the restaurant. As if to follow after him, Matsuoka also paid his bill and left the restaurant, but by the time he stepped out, Hirose was a considerable distance away.

Matsuoka was surprised at his walking speed. When they had strolled together on their date, he'd never gotten the impression that Hirose walked fast. The man hurried along like a worker ant, and by the time Matsuoka caught up, they were more than halfway there to the station already.

Now, Matsuoka's next challenge was starting a conversation with a man in brisk motion. It would probably be strange to come up from behind him and suddenly say, "You're from the same company, aren't you? We were actually in the same restaurant back there." They ended up arriving at the station before he could make a decision. Hirose quickly bought a ticket and descended the stairs to the platform.

The man finally stopped walking at the boarding line on the platform. Matsuoka caught his breath behind him. Just as he said "Excuse me," an express train hurtled through the station, blaring its warning siren. After the roaring ceased, Matsuoka called out again, now past the point of caring.

"Excuse me!"

"Yes?" The man turned around with a surprised look. Seeing his face made Matsuoka realize for the first time now unnaturally loud his voice had been. It was almost like he was trying to pick a fight.

"Can I help you?"

He had spoken to the man, and he had received a reply. That was all it was; yet, Matsuoka was tongue-tied. Panic raced through his whole body, and sweat poured from his forehead. He was supposed to be used to making small talk from his job in Sales, but nothing came out. His mind was blank as if it had been washed clean.

"Is there something I can help you with?" he was asked.

"Um," Matsuoka managed to wring out. "You're... we're in the same company, aren't we?"

Hirose gazed intently at Matsuoka's face, then tilted his head. "Do you work at Koishikawa Laboratory?"

"Oh, no. I work at headquarters."

"Oh, I see," said Hirose, but he still seemed to be mystified as to why Matsuoka had spoken to him.

"I'm in the Sales department at headquarters. You helped me out a little with making copies a while ago, do you remember? I happened to spot you at the *izakaya* today, and I realized you were from that time..."

He could hear the click-clack of the approaching train. It grew louder and louder. Some moments after the first car passed them, the train let out a long squeal of its brakes before it came to a stop.

"I'm really sorry, but I, er, can't seem to remember your face. You remind me of someone I know, but she's a woman," Hirose admitted apologetically. "I'm really sorry."

His gaze flicked to the train as he apologized. Matsuoka could tell from his attitude that he wanted to get on the train. He couldn't hold up a man who wanted to go home, so Matsuoka gave his best sales smile.

"No, that's alright. Don't feel bad about it."

"Goodbye, then."

The door closed just as the man stepped onto the train. Hirosue glanced at him through the train window, and when their eyes met, he inclined his head slightly.

As Matsuoka watched the train grow smaller into the distance, he was overcome with a sense of fruitlessness. If Yoko Eto had been the one standing here, Hirosue probably would not have gotten on the train, even if he told him to.

He walked over to the platform on the other side, where he was getting on. He sat on the bench, and missed four trains while he thought.

Hirosue had noticed that he and Yoko Eto looked alike, but he probably didn't even dream that they were the same person. Undoubtedly, the possibility had never even occurred to him.

Matsuoka cradled his head in his hands. He had no idea what he could do to get to know him. The man had said he barely came to that restaurant anymore; how was he supposed to create opportunities to bump into him by chance? Stake him out at the laboratory? It was impossible to visit such a faraway place almost every day. Then, stake him out and catch him on his way home? Their train lines ran in opposite directions. Maybe he could stake out a convenience store near Hirosue's apartment—

But even if they became acquainted, how long would it take for him to reach the same level of intimacy as Yoko Eto?

If Yoko Eto had wanted to see Hirosue, one e-mail from her saying "I want to see you" would have brought the man running. And, no doubt, he would have greeted Matsuoka with a joyful smile when he came.

Everywhere he went, he heard some sort of Christmas song playing. Everyone on the streets seemed restless in anticipation.

Matsuoka boarded a subway that connected directly to the underground level of a department store, dressed as a woman for the first time in ages. His fur-trimmed white coat flattered his entire figure, even in his own opinion. Already, two men had tried to strike up a conversation with him while he waited for the train.

It was not quite peak hour yet, but the train was still rather crowded. Apart from his purse, Matsuoka was also holding a paper bag, which contained a gift he'd just bought. After debating a great deal over what to get, he had ended up getting gloves. They were simple black leather gloves, thin but very warm. Ties and clothes were greatly subject to personal taste, but Matsuoka felt people tended to have less preferences with gloves. Black gloves, in particular, would be easy to co-ordinate with anything.

As he cast his gaze across the boring scenery out the subway window, Matsuoka sighed for another countless time. Since then—since approaching Hirosue at the station, he hadn't seen the man

at all. He had no luck staking out the station closest to Hirosue's apartment, either, presumably because of the man's erratic work hours. Matsuoka had his own work, so he wasn't always able to stake out the station at the same time every day. Failed attempt after failed attempt aggravated him until his impatience reached its peak.

Before he knew it, it was Christmas Eve. Matsuoka wanted some way to give the man a gift; that was his only reason for crossdressing today. He simply wanted to make the man happy. He wasn't thinking about what would follow afterwards.

He got off at the nearest station to Hirosue's apartment and went through the ticket gates. It was seven in the evening, but there were no lights on in Room 306 on the third floor. Having made sure Hirosue wasn't home, he headed back to the front of the station again and waited in front of the ticket gates for Hirosue to come through. He knew he could have waited at the man's apartment, but he wouldn't be able to explain himself if Hirosue asked how he knew the address. That was why Matsuoka was going to feign a chance meeting at the station. As for the gift, he would explain that he initially got it from someone else without realizing they were men's gloves. Maybe it was rude to re-gift, but he didn't want to give Hirosue false hopes by saying he bought them himself.

Even though Matsuoka had planned to get rid of Yoko Eto completely, when the need arose, he found himself using her existence to his advantage. He knew he was being contradictory, but he couldn't help it.

He heard a joyful exclamation beside him. The people around him looked up at the sky. It was snowing. Though the air had been uncannily cold since this morning, he hadn't expected it to snow.

He admired the coming of a white Christmas, but that feeling was brief. As the evening wore on and the bustle gradually died out, Matsuoka began to feel anxious. Hirosue was bound to come through the station, which was why he was waiting here. But even after two hours, there were no signs of him. He had already gone to the man's apartment once and made sure he wasn't home yet. Hirosue had to pass through the station to get home.

He has to be coming, Matsuoka told himself, but froze the next moment as realization dawned on him. Perhaps Hirosue was celebrating his birthday with someone. If not a girlfriend, maybe a friend. If so, he would probably not come home for some time, and if he did, there was a chance he would use some other mode of transportation.

Matsuoka hastily headed back towards Hirosue's apartment, his legs stiff and weary from standing. The apartment window was lit, and Matsuoka's shoulders sagged as he realized the man had come home without taking the train.

Now the option of feigning coincidence was out of the question. Matsuoka was at his wit's end. If he visited Hirosue just to give him a gift, he would give the man false hope. But even if he didn't, Hirosue might still get the wrong idea if he found out the gift was from him.

He could hang the gift on Hirosue's doorknob and go home—but if he didn't sign it with a name, the man would probably be more suspicious than happy. Matsuoka arrived in front of Hirosue's door, still unable to come to a decision. There was a doorbell, but he couldn't push it. Matsuoka quietly drew closer, and heard the sounds of the TV playing inside.

The minutes wore on without meaning. Five minutes. Ten minutes. After much internal debate, Matsuoka took out his notebook. On a blank page, he wrote, 'A present for you. -Yoko'.

"Ms. Yoko?"

Matsuoka whipped around in surprise. Hirosue was standing there, wearing a black sweatshirt and sweatpants. A convenience-store bag dangled from his right hand. Matsuoka had heard footsteps, but had ignored them since he thought Hirosue was inside.

"It is you, Ms. Yoko." His look of astonishment turned to joy. Just the sight of it made Matsuoka's heart race. "You knew where I live?"

There was no way he could say he had followed the man home once. Matsuoka hastily flipped the page over and thought of an excuse.

'An acquaintance of mine lives nearby. That's when I caught a glimpse of you.'

Hirosue read the note. "I see," he murmured. Matsuoka held out the gift he was holding.

"What's this?"

Matsuoka showed him the note he had written earlier, saying "a present for you".

"But why?"

'For your birthday,' Matsuoka added. Hirosue stared at the note, then lifted his face.

"Thank you," he said, but his hands did not move to accept the gift. "I guess I mentioned my birthday to you somewhere along the way, didn't I? I'm really happy that you got this for me, but your thoughts are enough."

Matsuoka bit his lip lightly. He thrust the gift out.

"I'm sorry to do this after you went through the trouble of getting it, but I don't want any physical objects from you."

Matsuoka hung the bag on the doorknob, then slipped past Hirosue. Just as he was about to go down the stairs, the man stopped him. Hirosue's grip on his right arm was so strong it hurt.

"What's going on in your mind?" the man asked, his face contorted in desperation. "You stopped answering my e-mails, so I thought you'd dumped me. I tried to forget you. I had to make myself forget you. But why are you showing up now? Why are you giving me hope again with a present? My mood hinges on your every whim. It's like I'm on an emotional roller coaster, and I can't stand it."

Matsuoka struggled when he felt himself being drawn closer, but the man was several times stronger than him.

"I love you."

Matsuoka felt faint as he was embraced.

"You know that, don't you?" In words Hirosue reproached him, but with his arms he held him close. Matsuoka's back hurt from the man's grip. At the sound of footsteps coming up the stairs, Hirosue snapped out of it abruptly straightened up. With a firm grip on Matsuoka's right wrist, he picked up the convenience-store bag he had dropped in front of the door and fished out a key from the pocket of his sweats.

A young man emerged at the top of the stairs, and he gave a sidelong glance at Matsuoka and Hirosue in passing. Matsuoka was struck with fear as he realized he was going to be dragged inside. Things would get too risky if they were alone together.

The door opened. Matsuoka pulled his right hand away, trying to shake free, but he was drawn closer with twice as much force. His high-heels made him unsteady on his feet, and he teetered

precariouly. He was taken inside, still entrapped in the man's arms.

He sensed the man trying to kiss him on the doorstep, and averted his face. The man didn't try to kiss him forcefully this time, but instead stood there looking completely lost. He had let his tumultuous feelings get carried away enough to drag Matsuoka in, but now he seemed to be confused about what to do.

"Please come in. I hope you'll excuse the mess..."

There wasn't much point to the invitation, since Matsuoka had already been dragged in.

"I won't do anything to you," he added, as if sensing Matsuoka's concern. His handcuff-like fingers fell away. Now, it was up to Matsuoka's free will. If he wanted to go home, he just had to walk out the door. If he wanted to stay, he could do that, too.

He could hear the sounds of the TV further inside the room. The muted chatter of it made the tense situation seem ridiculous.

Matsuoka opened the door and stepped outside first. The gift was still hanging from the doorknob. He took it and offered it to Hirosue again. Hirosue didn't even try to smile out of politeness; he accepted it looking like he was about to cry.

In the cramped doorway, Matsuoka bent forward slightly and took off his shoes. When he entered the apartment, the roughly four-square-metre room had a futon still laid out in a corner and a *kotatsu*⁹ in the centre. It was certainly far from a fashionable apartment; there were signs of everyday life all over the place.

Matsuoka sat in front of the *kotatsu*. When he stuck his feet inside, the heat enveloped his extremities. Hirosue stood vacantly at the entrance for a while, but eventually came in. His stepped cautiously, even though this was his own apartment.

"I'm sorry it's so messy. Really," he mumbled, hastily scooping up tangerine peels from the table and throwing them in the garbage.

There was nothing eye-catching in the room. Matsuoka stared at his surroundings with immodest interest, making Hirosue duck his head in awkward nervousness.

"Um, would you like some coffee or something?" Hirosue busily went to the kitchen and put the kettle on. Even though the water was far from boiling, he didn't move a single step away from the propane range.

"I hope you don't mind instant coffee."

The coffee placed before him smelled the same as the instant coffee that was always served for afternoon break at his work. It was unremarkable in both smell and taste, but it still warmed him up.

"Are you hungry?" Hirosue asked from across the table, not even touching the coffee he had poured for himself.

'A little,' he replied truthfully on paper. As soon as he handed it over, the man began to panic.

"I have rice balls from the convenience store. Is that okay with you?"

From the frequently-dropped bag, he took out an assortment of side dishes such as packaged rice balls, salad, stewed vegetables, and boiled greens with dressing. Although Matsuoka was hungry, he was reluctant to eat what was clearly intended to be Hirosue's dinner.

9 A type of winter furniture; a low table with a heater attached to the underside. A blanket drapes down the sides so the heat doesn't escape.

'But this is your dinner, isn't it?' he wrote, but the man hastily shook his head.

"That's alright," he said. "I'm not that hungry." His stomach growled plaintively as soon as the words were out of his mouth. The man flushed deeply. "My stomach hasn't been doing that well," he said lamely.

Since he couldn't steal a hungry man's dinner, Matsuoka wrote him a note.

'I'll go out and buy something.'

The man changed colour upon seeing the note. "You don't need to go," he blurted. "I really don't want it. Please, eat this."

Hirosue was reluctant to let him go outside, yet he showed no move to go out and buy something for Matsuoka himself. Matsuoka wondered why Hiro sue didn't want to leave his apartment. He then realized he was wrong: Hiro sue wasn't reluctant about leaving his apartment; he was reluctant about leaving Matsuoka alone.

'Let's each have half, then,' Matsuoka suggested as a compromise. Hiro sue still insisted he didn't want any, but Matsuoka ignored him and briskly split the meal into two equal portions. He began to eat his portion, and Hiro sue hesitated before starting on his own. Once they finished their meal, Hiro sue cleaned off the table in a spirited bustle. The TV was showcasing a gorgeous display of Christmas lights.

'Take a look at the present.'

Hirosue had sat back down across from him. After reading the note, he reached over to the paper bag and pulled it closer. He peeled each piece of tape off the package with great care. When the gloves appeared, a natural smile graced his lips. He stroked the gloves with his fingertips as if to savour the feel of the leather, and then put them on. He lightly flexed his long fingers.

"They're so warm. Thank you. Are you sure I can have such a nice pair of gloves? I feel like they're too good to wear."

'Nonsense. Please wear them often.'

The man smiled and put the gloves back in the box. Once the big presentation was over, silence fell again.

"Oh, would you like some tangerines? My parents sent them from the countryside." Without waiting for an answer, the man took out a few tangerines from the cardboard box in a corner of the room and placed them on the table.

To be truthful, the meagre amount of dinner had been barely enough to fill Matsuoka up. He helped himself to the tangerines as if to make up for it. The TV was still robustly broadcasting Christmas-related segments. Matsuoka found himself wondering when would be the right time to go home.

It wasn't like he wanted to go home, but he also did feel like he wasn't allowed to be here for long. Halfway through his third tangerine, he felt a pair of eyes on him. Suddenly, he became so nervous that it was difficult to bring the food to his lips as easily as he had just moments ago.

He sensed the man across from him shifting, and put himself on guard. Hiro sue came over beside Matsuoka, and sat with his knees together. Matsuoka thought he would say something, but Hiro sue only stared at the floor and did not open his mouth.

"I feel like I have a pedigreed cat in my room that's too good for the place." The words, when

they finally came, were abstract. "I feel like you shouldn't be here after all."

He was awfully weak-willed for someone who had dragged him into his apartment. The man slowly looked up at the wall.

"The last train leaves in thirty minutes."

Matsuoka felt like he was being told to go home. He got up.

"What? What's wrong? Are you going home?"

Now Matsuoka was confused at being held back. *Isn't that why you told me when the last train was leaving? Because you want me to go home?* He was the one that wanted to ask.

"But if you want to go home, I can't hold you back—" His pitiful face said he didn't want Matsuoka to go. Matsuoka sat back down, unable to fathom Hirose's intentions.

Hirose placed both hands on the floor and slowly crawled his way closer to Matsuoka. Even when they were nose-to-nose, Matsuoka didn't try to get away; he had seen Hirose's face—and the man looked like he was about to cry. They bumped noses on their first kiss. It was unbelievably clumsy, but Matsuoka couldn't bring himself to laugh.

They shared one chaste kiss, their lips merely brushing against each other's. It was a childish kiss, but Matsuoka's ears still burned. They kissed for a second time, then a third.

On the fourth, the man touched his hair, which made him scoot back hastily. Hirose suddenly gave him a hurt look. Matsuoka went over to the notebook lying on top of the *kotatsu*.

'I don't like people touching my hair,' he wrote. When he picked the book up to show Hirose, he felt a presence behind him. Before he could turn around, he was embraced from behind.

He nearly let out a voice. He felt the man's body heat right up against his back. His strong arms were crossed over Matsuoka's abdomen. Matsuoka was completely trapped between the man's legs.

He felt a wet sensation on his neck. He didn't feel pain from the biting kiss, but it made his heart flutter. He felt the hand on his belly slowly creeping up his side, and he hastily wrote, *'Don't,'* on a note. This time, the man's fingers descended along his hipbone and stroked his thigh. Matsuoka grabbed the man's teasing hand.

Once he was refused, Hirose didn't try to touch him again. But since there was no restriction on kisses, he kissed Matsuoka many, many times.

Their gazes were interlocked like lovers. Hirose certainly wasn't a handsome man, but the more Matsuoka looked at him, the more attractive he seemed to become. He was overcome with dizziness as his own mind deceived him.

"It's past twelve," murmured the man. "The last train's gone. You can't go home now."

If Matsuoka really wanted to go home, it didn't have to be on the last train. He could still take a taxi. There were other ways. It didn't matter whether the last train had left or not. But the man's words made Matsuoka really feel like he couldn't go home.

"I want you to stay with me until morning." The man tightened his arms around Matsuoka. "I won't do anything to you... please, just until morning..."

Matsuoka exhaled quietly. Maybe he wouldn't stay for the whole night, but he felt like there would be no harm if he stayed until the man was satisfied.

When Matsuoka woke up, it was past six in the morning. The dawning sky was still dim, and he was in Hirosue's arms. The blanket draped over him was heavy and smelled like Hirosue. He hadn't felt cold, despite lying on *tatami* flooring, because he had been in the man's embrace this whole time. Matsuoka moved, but Hirosue didn't show signs of waking up.

Matsuoka lifted half of his body off the floor and stroked the man's cheek. The gritty texture of his stubble made heat gather in his lower half. Overcome with yearning, Matsuoka kissed the man's cheek. Hirosue had meant it when he said he wouldn't do anything. A fully grown man past his thirties had actually gone no further than hold the woman he loved as they slept. His sincerity was endearing.

Matsuoka kissed the man again before getting to his feet and picking up his purse. He left a note, merely saying he was going home, and headed to the door. Suddenly, he heard a noisy shuffle from behind. The man was coming after him, his eyes still bleary.

"Ms. Yokoi!"

His hair was a mess and his eyelids were swollen with sleep.

"A—Are you going home?"

Matsuoka nodded silently. When the man slumped in despair, Matsuoka took his right hand.

'The trains have started to run now.'

"But..."

'You have work, too, don't you?'

"Yeah, but..."

Hirosue resisted being talked out of it, even though he understood well they both had work.

"When can I see you next?" he asked. "When will you let me see you?"

Matsuoka couldn't give an immediate promise.

"Can I e-mail you again? Can I call you?"

Matsuoka nodded. Nodded—then sidled up to Hirosue, and put his arms around the man's neck. After gently hugging him, he kissed him as if they were lovers.

Hirosue's face was etched with disbelief. Right before Matsuoka's eyes, the man's expression turned from stunned to one more ecstatic than he had ever seen, and the sight sent a restless stir through Matsuoka's heart.

He got an e-mail not even three minutes after leaving Hirosue's apartment.

'It was the best birthday ever,' it said. Another one came while he was still reading it.

'After you left, I've been trying to get ready to go to work, but I can't seem to concentrate on anything,' it said. *'All I do is keep remembering you. Even though we just parted, I can't stop thinking about when we're going to be able to see each other again.'* After the three consecutive e-mails, there was a brief silence.

Once he arrived at the station, Matsuoka suddenly felt the urge to go to the bathroom. He entered the men's room and shocked the middle-aged man inside. He remembered he was crossdressed, and hastily dove into the women's room. He did his business, washed his hands, looked up and was horrified at his face in the mirror.

His foundation was melting and sticky, and his lipstick had smudged off. He looked as close to

his real self as he could possibly get. He frantically touched his chin and felt a slight gritty sensation. He wasn't hairy to begin with, but he was still susceptible to growing a little stubble. They had kissed so many times—didn't Hirose feel anything strange?

Matsuoka hastily reapplied his makeup and walked out of the restroom. Even though his makeup was fixed now, he felt like someone would notice and point out his chin, so he walked with his head down.

As he stood on a platform crowded with school uniforms, he received his fourth e-mail from Hirose.

'I was so glad that I could spend time with you. How about you? Were you just putting up with my selfishness?'

No, I wasn't, he was about to write, but he got another e-mail.

'I love you.' The next one came again before he could think. *'I love you so, so much.'*

Matsuoka could guess the kind of expression the man had on his face as he wrote this.

'I love you, too,' he wrote and sent. He decided not to think of the past or the future. He just wanted to tell the man his honest feelings—that he loved him.

At this point he had already become the weaker player in love, but Matsuoka failed to realize it.

He received an invitation from Hirose to go out for dinner three days after they had spent the night together. The end of the year was nigh, and they were extremely busy at work, but Matsuoka did not turn him down. He not only agreed, but even brushed off his boss' irritation and took a three-hour leave to go home, get changed, and put his makeup on.

On the day of their dinner, Matsuoka was in high spirits since morning. Throughout the day, all he thought of was meeting up with Hirose. They e-mailed each other every day and kept in touch, but Matsuoka was beginning to want more.

He was well aware it wasn't right to start meeting Hirose again in drag like this. He knew he would have to confess that he was a man someday. He knew—but he was still hesitant. He enjoyed meeting with Hirose in a woman's form. *A little longer wouldn't hurt,* he couldn't help but think.

Dinner was at a French restaurant, most likely Hirose's best attempt to impress him. When the wine list was handed to him, Hirose creased his brow and pored over it helplessly. Even the sight of him like this was endearing to Matsuoka, and several times he had to hold back his laughter.

Their meal was delicious, and they enjoyed their time together. Even after they left the restaurant at nine, they were reluctant to part, and instead strolled along. Matsuoka tensed up when they came close to the hotel district, but Hirose didn't appear to be looking that way.

Before they parted, he was kissed right in front of the station, in an embarrassingly public place. Matsuoka had always wondered with incredulity how people could kiss in public, but when he was put into that position, he realized it was on a whole different level from social embarrassment. The impulses that bubbled up inside him were not things he could stop, even if he wanted to.

After they parted and while the sensation of the kiss still lingered on his lips, he got another e-mail.

'I forgot to tell you – let's go on a hatsumode¹⁰ together in the New Year.'

The word *hatsumode* made Matsuoka excited for future plans.

'When should we go?' he asked.

'What about the third or the fourth? I'm going back to my parents' for New Years. What are your plans for New Years, Ms. Yoko?' was the reply.

Matsuoka was crestfallen at the e-mail. His own parents had mentioned going on a trip and ringing in the New Year at the hot springs. They were planning a relaxing getaway, being waited on hand and foot. They had invited Matsuoka as well, but he had turned them down because he wasn't the age to be taking trips with his parents anymore.

If Hirosue was going to be around, he had figured they could spend the end of the year together. But that wasn't going to happen anymore because he was going back to his hometown. Matsuoka couldn't intrude on their family, and if he mentioned he would stay behind, he felt like Hirosue would follow suit and stay as well.

'I'm going back to my parents', too,' he ended up writing.

'Then, I guess the next time I'll get to see you is in the New Year.' The man's carefree tone got on his nerves. Matsuoka wanted to be with him, but they always seemed to be on bad timing.

'Right,' he sent shortly, still irritated.

Hirosue seemed to sense some unrest, for he sent a reply: *'Are you angry?'*

Matsuoka ignored it and turned his cell phone off. When he turned it back on roughly an hour later, he had about ten e-mails in his inbox. All of them were from Hirosue. It began with, 'Why are you angry?' and went on and on to say, 'Was I insensitive? Did I say something that got on your nerves?' and ended with, 'I'm sorry.'

If he left it like this, he figured Hirosue probably wouldn't be able to sleep. Matsuoka wrote a reply.

'No, I should be sorry. It's nothing.'

The reply came as swiftly as if the man had been staring at his cell phone screen.

'I'm glad to hear that.'

Their commonplace conversation drew to a close with Matsuoka's good-night e-mail. He sank down on the couch absently without even taking off his makeup, still wearing female clothes.

Being an adult, he had an idea of how much Hirosue was restraining his urges. There was no way a full-grown man wouldn't physically desire a woman whom he loved and who also had feelings for him. Matsuoka couldn't deny that he felt Hirosue gaze at him in that way from time to time, but Hirosue never invited him to a hotel. Even if he had, Matsuoka would have naturally refused.

Kissing felt nice. He also didn't mind being touched. But even with the same love, there was a world of difference between the bodies of a man and woman. He had to tell Hirosue some day. He had to tell him he was a man. He'd known that from the beginning; that was why he'd tried approaching the man as a male. He hadn't even been able to get the man's attention.

Matsuoka wished Hirosue would fall even more deeply in love with him. He wished the man

10 The first visit to a Shinto shrine in the New Year, where wishes for the new year are made and good-luck charms are bought.

would come to love him so much that it went beyond gender—and it didn't matter anymore whether he was a man or a woman.

The New Year came, and Matsuoka met with Hirosue on the third. They agreed to meet in front of the station, where it was teeming with people. Matsuoka felt his heart race as soon as he spotted Hirosue running towards him from the ticket gates. It had only been about a week or so since they saw each other last, and even though they had exchanged e-mails almost every day, it was different seeing him in person like this. Completely different.

"Happy New Year," Hirosue grinned. The tip of his nose and his cheeks were red, and Matsuoka could tell he'd come running so he wouldn't be late for their meeting time. It was so adorable he wanted to throw his arms around the man.

They held hands as they walked from the station to the Shinto shrine. When it became crowded, they linked arms. Hirosue didn't talk much, but this was enough. After they walked down the long path leading to the Shinto shrine, they gave their prayers and drew a fortune slip.¹¹

"What was yours?" Hirosue attempted to peek at his, and Matsuoka ran away to discreetly look at his fortune alone. It was "Future Good Luck."¹² Under "Love", his fortune said, "Difficulties ahead. Wait for the right time." He smiled wryly to himself and promptly tied it to the branch of a tree near the fortune-slip vendor. He got Hirosue to reveal his fortune. It was Great Fortune, and in terms of love, it said, "All will be well if you proceed." Matsuoka wondered why their fortunes were so different when it was about the same love.

On the way back, Matsuoka's feet starting aching partway down the path leading from the shrine. Hirosue caught his peculiar gait, and made Matsuoka sit down on one of the large rocks at the entrance of the shrine. A long stretch of walking in gravel with his best stilettos had made a blister form on the base of his big toes.

"You didn't have to force yourself until it got this bad," Hirosue said. But Matsuoka had wanted to wear stilettos today, no matter what.

At first, when he thought of *hatsumode* he knew he should naturally wear a kimono. But even if he rented one, he wouldn't know how to wear it. And even if he'd practised enough to dress himself, a kimono would expose his neck. He considered wearing furs to cover his neck, but if he did, he wouldn't be able to take it off for the whole day.

He figured Hirosue would want to see him in a kimono, but in the end, he gave up. Instead, he decided he would wear an outfit that was cute enough to compete with women in kimonos who would be around them that day. His deep green velour dress and his delicate stiletto heels made for a perfect balance between top and bottom. He thought momentarily about aching feet, but he didn't want to destroy his perfect arrangement with a pair of frumpy loafers.

11 Also called *omikuj*, they are little slips of paper drawn from a box which tell one's fortune. They have a general fortune ranging from Great Misfortune to Great Fortune along with several categories for health, love, business, academics, birth, etc.

12 On a scale of 1 to 13, with 1 being Great Misfortune and 13 being Great Fortune, Future Good Luck is about a 7.

Hirosue stood before him looking worried. Matsuoka drew his hand close and wrote, *'It's okay, I can walk.'*

"But your feet hurt, don't they?"

Matsuoka shook his head, but the dubious expression did not leave Hirosue's face. Suddenly, he crouched down slightly and scooped Matsuoka up sideways into his arms.

"Just put up with me until the end of the path. Once we get to the main street, I think we'll be able to catch a taxi."

Without even asking for Matsuoka's permission, he proceeded to walk out in public. Matsuoka was so mortified, he put his arms around Hirosue's neck and buried his face in the man's shoulder.

Once they reached the main street, they hailed a taxi.

"I'm sure you wouldn't feel like going out to eat now with your feet aching like that," Hirosue said, and they decided to go home. The back seat of the taxi was large enough to fit three grown adults, but they sat nestled right beside each other.

Hirosue took him to his apartment door. Matsuoka let him do it, then regretted it. It was so aloof just to send him home like this. The usual thing to do would be to invite the man in for tea.

But Matsuoka's suit and briefcase were out in his room, and right at the entrance were a pair of men's shoes. There was no way he could let the man in.

Hirosue faithfully waited like a dog for Matsuoka's next words.

'Thank you for today. I'm sorry,' Matsuoka wrote on the man's palm. He felt a hand gently pat his head.

"Don't worry about that." There was nothing but kindness on his face as he said it. Matsuoka gazed in admiration at him. If he were a woman, he would probably have invited this man over. And he would have wanted to know what sex was like with this man.

"I want to see your house, Ms. Yoko," the man said while they gazed into each other's eyes.

'I'm sorry. It's a mess today.'

"Even just a little."

'I'm sorry,' Matsuoka staunchly refused. Hirosue didn't press him any further, but instead, hugged him tightly and kissed him. Matsuoka wanted the kiss, so he put his arms around the man, too. Even the rough sensation of his chapped lips was enough to make him aroused.

After they kissed, they still remained in an embrace. It was soothing to feel the man's hand rub his back.

"You know, when I went back home," Hirosue murmured. "They asked me if I was going to get married soon. They ask me that every year. This year, I told them I have someone I love. I told them I love her enough that I'm thinking of marrying her."

Matsuoka's whole body trembled.

"I bragged to them and said she's someone who's beautiful both on the inside and outside."

His smile, which was even somewhat naive, aggravated the guilt residing in Matsuoka.

"That's how serious I am about you." The man refused to undo his embrace, and Matsuoka had to send him home by saying he was tired. Once he was alone in his apartment, Matsuoka sat down in shock. Hirosue was thirty-four; he wasn't the age to date women for fun anymore. It was natural for the topic of marriage to come up if he was dating.

No matter if Hirosue wanted to marry him; it was simply impossible. Matsuoka was attracted to the man, kissed him, and was interested in sex with him, but he could never get married to him. If they couldn't get married, if Hirosue's wish was to have a normal family—was it better if they broke up?

Matsuoka loved Hirosue. It was fun to be with him, he made his heart race, and more than anything, the man was kind. It didn't matter if Hirosue was a little bit of a fearful pushover. It didn't matter if he couldn't do his work. The man had told him he loved him, and Matsuoka loved him back, too. Did they really need to break up?

A ringtone went off, signalling a new e-mail. Matsuoka flinched exaggeratedly at the familiar sound.

'How are your feet?'

Matsuoka's heart ached at his kind words.

'About what I said back there, it wasn't a joke. I wanted you to know, Ms. Yoko, that that's how seriously I'm thinking about you right now.'

It was like receiving a blow when he was already down.

'I love you. I don't know how many times I've written this already before, but...'

Matsuoka scrolled down and read the line that said 'I love you' over and over again.

"So what, can you still say you love me even if I'm a man?" he said out loud, asking a question to which he knew he would never receive an answer.

He began to notice that things were off on Thursday. Matsuoka usually had an e-mail waiting for him after he came home from work, but he had received none today. It was already past midnight.

He figured Hirosue was busy with work, and left it at that. But even when Friday rolled around the next day, and then Saturday, he still hadn't received a phone call, or even a single e-mail. When the weekend drew near, Hirosue always asked him about his plans. Matsuoka always received some sort of invite—"How would you like to go out somewhere?" "Would you like to meet up for a meal?"—and because he saw it coming, Matsuoka was always careful to leave his plans open during the weekend. Even if he was a little tired from work, he still went out.

This was the first time since they had started dating that he hadn't received any sort of contact. Matsuoka started feeling anxious, and sent an e-mail himself.

'Are you busy?'

Hours passed without an answer from the man, making him even more anxious. He couldn't imagine Hirosue ignoring his e-mails; perhaps he was hurt and couldn't move? Foreboding thoughts swirled in his mind.

In the evening, Matsuoka did his makeup neatly and went out. It was snowing outside, and it was freezing cold. He always wore a skirt when meeting up with Hirosue, so his feet were always frozen stiff. But he endured it.

They had begun dating in the end of December, and it was the end of February now. It was almost two months. Matsuoka had ended up continuing their relationship, unable to muster the courage to confess that he was a man.

He constantly thought about when to say it and how, but he could never make the decision, and he could never find the right timing. While he dallied and dawdled, they had become so close that there was no going back.

Matsuoka knew Hirosue's scent, how he kissed, and how he stroked his back. He knew Hirosue was the youngest amongst the three kids in his family, and his two older siblings were already married. He knew that people had called Hirosue calm and tranquil since he was young.

Hirosue was absolutely lacking in hobbies, and he wasn't even interested in movies, music, or sports. When he said with a straight face that "Ms. Yoko" was what he was most into right now, it was believable coming from him. But Matsuoka found it so adorable that he wished he could eat him up. It was because he knew that Hirosue was completely into him, and only him.

Matsuoka got off at the station near Hirosue's apartment and walked. He sent an e-mail on the train, but there was no reply.

As he stood in front of the apartment, he could hear the sounds of the TV inside. But it didn't necessarily mean that Hirosue was home; Matsuoka knew that Hirosue often didn't bother turning the lights and TV off if he was going somewhere nearby.

When Matsuoka pressed the doorbell, he heard shuffling from inside.

"Coming!"

The door opened. Hirosue wasn't badly hurt, nor did he look ill. It was the same Hirosue he was used to seeing. The man grimaced as soon as he saw Matsuoka's face. Usually, he would grin and ask, "What's the occasion?" but this reaction was different.

'You weren't answering my e-mails, so,' Matsuoka wrote on a note and showed him.

"Oh... yeah. I was busy. Sorry." His mumbling sounded like an excuse.

'I was worried because I thought you were sick or hurt.'

"I'm sorry. Really." Hirosue bowed his head.

'I'm glad you seem to be doing well.' Even after Matsuoka showed him the note, Hirosue continued to look at the floor. It was quite cold outside. As Matsuoka continued to watch Hirosue's bowed head, he wondered when the man would let him in.

"Sorry for making you come all this way, but would you please go home now?"

Matsuoka was shocked.

"I'm sorry."

Hirosue wasn't even going to let him in, and was telling him to go back home under this frigid winter sky. It was unbelievable.

"I'm really..."

The door was closed forcefully without even giving Matsuoka time to answer. Matsuoka stood in stunned silence before the door. He had visited Hirosue's apartment a number of times before, and Hirosue had always walked him to the station. Today, he didn't even do that.

Anger rose within him. Matsuoka was so furious, he didn't even feel the cold on the walk back. He turned off his cell phone. Even if Hirosue sent an apology e-mail, he planned not to answer. But even after Matsuoka reached his own apartment, he did not receive a single e-mail—nothing thanking him for coming, much less apologizing.

Matsuoka grew unsettled. He didn't know what could be behind Hirosue's change in attitude.

He was normal the last time they had seen each other. They had parted with a kiss as always, and Hirosue had told him he loved him.

Matsuoka thought and thought and finally reached one conclusion which made him go pale.

Maybe he's found out I'm a man. If this was true, he could understand why he had suddenly stopped getting e-mails. Hirosue was angry, and that was why he wasn't contacting him anymore. But how had he found out? As far as Matsuoka knew, he hadn't done anything foolish to give himself away.

They had kissed and embraced many times, but Matsuoka had never let Hirosue touch his chest. He was neurotically careful about his skin, particularly his face. He always wore turtlenecks or scarves to keep his Adam's apple out of sight. But Hirosue had still caught on. Since they had been dating for a while now, perhaps Matsuoka had unwittingly let his guard down somewhere.

Hirosue didn't love him anymore. Just the thought made the world fade to black before his eyes. He couldn't even be bothered to take his makeup off or change, and instead sank to the floor in his room. This was why he should have obliterated Yoko Eto from this world before he got found out. He should have continued to build up a relationship with Hirosue as himself, no matter how much time it took.

But after becoming this close to romance, would he have been able to go back to the beginning? By this time, he had gotten used to being told he was loved, and being hugged and kissed had become something of a norm.

It didn't matter if he was exhausted from consecutive days of backbreaking sales visits and felt like taking it easy over the weekend. If Hirosue invited him out, he went. It was fun going on outings, but Matsuoka liked holing up at home with the man, too. Once, when Matsuoka had sat in his lap as a joke, Hirosue had looked immensely happy. After that, whenever he wanted to make Hirosue smile, he would perch on his lap on purpose. On more than one occasion, he would be kissed and cuddled by the man, and rocked in his arms so comfortably he would fall right asleep in his lap. Matsuoka could only fall asleep in his arms because he knew for certain that Hirosue would never take advantage of him while he was asleep.

He loved that the man, who called himself a bad speaker, tried his best to talk to him. He talked about his childhood, and his student life. Matsuoka felt like he was taking a peek into Hirosue's past with him, and he enjoyed it. A few times the man asked him, "Don't you get bored because I have nothing interesting to say?" but Matsuoka didn't mind.

He went out even though he was tired, not because he was invited out, but because he wanted to see Hirosue. Meeting up with him and being with him put him at ease. If he was in a bad mood from an unfortunate happening, he was able to forget about it when he was with Hirosue.

Maybe the man was simply busy, or Matsuoka had caught him in a bad moment. Maybe he hadn't found out Matsuoka was a man, and he was just thinking too much. *Everyone has moments when they'd rather be by themselves, when they'd want to be left alone.*

Matsuoka could think of nothing else, as if this topic had become the only thing his mind was capable of handling. Had Hirosue found out he was a man, or had something unpleasant happened to him on an unrelated occasion?

Matsuoka picked up his cell phone. He tried sending another e-mail.

'What are you angry about?'

He had thought for half an hour about what to write. After much thought, he had chosen to write in clear and simple language. He received a reply not even five minutes later.

'Aren't you hiding something from me, Ms. Yoko?'

Matsuoka began to tremble as soon as he read it. He was certain now. The man knew. Matsuoka had no idea how to explain that he was actually a man. Was this even something that could be explained away? If he said he was sorry over and over, would he be forgiven?

He turned off his cell phone and hid it where he couldn't see. He was afraid of saying sorry. He figured Hirose would probably be the last person to lash out at Matsuoka for tricking him, but his heart wasn't ready to take the criticism that was sure to come his way.

If this was a game, if it was a joke, he would probably have been able to say "I'm sorry" easily. But now, he couldn't. He simply could not.

On Monday, Matsuoka went to work without getting much sleep. No amount of thought helped him see an end to this tunnel. All he did was go round and round like a Moebius loop, arriving back at the same spot.

The beginning of the week was always a drag for him, but this was the first time that he didn't want to go to work.

He stayed at the office only long enough to attend the morning meeting, then burst outside as usual where the snowflakes occasionally swirled in the air. He braved the freezing weather and dashed from one sales visit to the next, shivering. His clients, however, seemed to somehow sense that his mind wasn't on his job, for he had a hard time getting contracts. Close to evening, he finally garnered one new client. He returned to the office to find a memo pasted to his computer.

'1:00 pm – phone call from Mr. Hirose of Koishikawa Lab.'

As soon as Matsuoka read those words, he felt all the blood rush to his feet. Just yesterday he had turned things over and over in his mind and finally decided that he was going to keep a distance from Hirose, who was apparently angry at him. But now Hirose was trying to contacting him.

"Hey, did Mr. Hirose say anything?"

The handwriting on the memo belonged to Hayama. Hayama stopped typing and turned around.

"He only asked if you were here. I told him I could take a message, but he said he wasn't in a rush and hung up pretty quickly."

"Alright," Matsuoka said, then went back to his desk. He sat down, but all he did was stare at the computer screen without moving his fingers.

"Matsuoka, don't you need to write up the contract by today?" his senior said in the next seat over, and only then did Matsuoka hastily begin working. He managed to finish the contract, but he looked it over again and found typos and numbers off by the digits. He was still rewriting it when his section manager left the office for the day, and Matsuoka was forced to defer the task to the next day. It was past six by the time he finished fixing the contract. Matsuoka could have gone home, but he stayed behind. He had accumulated a lot of paperwork. Although none of it was urgent, he didn't

want to go home and be alone. Everyone around him began to leave while he stayed behind for an hour or so, and by the time Matsuoka got up to leave, there were only two people left.

He stepped onto the elevator and descended to the lobby on the first floor. The receptionists had gone home, and the lights in the lobby were turned off. Footsteps and voices bounced off the high, cavernous ceilings.

"I think he's gone home. A lot of people in Sales go straight home from doing rounds."

The irritating voice belonged to Fukuda. Matsuoka hadn't had a proper conversation with Fukuda since spilling the beans about his girlfriend, Okabayashi, to him at the beef rice shop.

"So, how are you doing yourself? Isn't it tough being in a department that's out of your field?"

Fukuda was talking to someone behind the round pillar. The man he was speaking to was tall, but Matsuoka couldn't see his face because the man's back was turned to him. He couldn't catch what the man was saying, either, because of his small voice.

Matsuoka walked right past Fukuda, pretending not to notice them. He thought he could get away while the man was conveniently in the shadows of the pillar, but unluckily, he was caught.

"Hey, is that you, Matsuoka?"

It would be too rude to ignore Fukuda now. Matsuoka had no choice but to turn around with a smile.

"Oh, hey, Fukuda. You're here late today."

Fukuda strode quickly over to him. "We had a meeting. Aren't *you* around pretty late for someone in Sales?"

"I had a lot of paperwork to do," Matsuoka explained. Fukuda laughed.

"Well, even if you work overtime, at least you get to take it easy during the day. It evens out in the end, right?"

Fukuda's tone grated on his nerves, but Matsuoka knew that losing his temper would only make him feel worse. So he smiled and smoothed it over.

"Yeah, you can say that, I guess. Well, see you then," he said, trying to leave.

"Wait," Fukuda stopped him.

"Something else?"

"Someone wants to talk to you. Hirosue who used to be in General Affairs. Remember him?"

Matsuoka's body stiffened when he saw the man appear from the dim shadows. Hirosue was looking at him with a mixture of nervousness and anger.

"It's not really our first time meeting, but... I don't think I've introduced myself properly. I'm Hirosue from Koishikawa Laboratory." Hirosue bowed his head slowly in front of Matsuoka. "I gave you a phone call, but I was told you were out."

"Oh, right." Matsuoka's voice trembled.

"I have something I want to talk to you about. Would you be able to spare me some time right now?"

In no way was Hirosue's tone forceful or obliging, but Matsuoka felt like refusal was not a choice. He followed after Hirosue like a prisoner being taken to the gallows. The only difference was that, unlike a prisoner's, his heart wasn't prepared to take the outcome awaiting him.

Hirosue went into a coffee shop close to the station. The place was famous for its delicious

coffee, but Matsuoka had never visited because it was on the opposite side from where he usually entered the station.

They sat down across from each other, but things were silent at first.

"Will you have anything?" Matsuoka was asked. A glass of water would have been enough, considering how he was feeling right now, but he ordered an americano anyway.

"Did you approach me at the station before?" the man asked.

"I might have," Matsuoka bluffed, though he knew what the man was talking about. He was unbearably thirsty, despite the cold outside. He reached for his glass of water, but his fingers shook so much he couldn't grasp it well. He ended up giving up.

"I know this might be rude, visiting you suddenly and asking you such an intrusive question when we barely know each other but... well... what kind of relationship do you have with Ms. Yoko Eto?"

Matsuoka didn't understand the question. He tilted his head. Hirosue paraphrased.

"Are you dating Ms. Eto?"

"Dating?"

"Aren't you in a romantic relationship with her?"

Matsuoka had no idea where Hirosue had gotten this notion.

"I don't know who Yoko Eto is," he lied. Hirosue's face twisted slightly.

"You live in Suite 502, Brides Apartments, Ogawa-cho, am I correct, Mr. Matsuoka? I looked it up on the employee list. You're living there with Ms. Yoko Eto, aren't you?"

Matsuoka could finally see where this was going. Hirosue hadn't realized yet that he and Yoko Eto were the same person.

"The other day, I happened to pass by Ms. Yoko's place, and I saw you go into her apartment. I was surprised because I always thought she lived by herself. At first, I thought you were siblings, since you have similar appearances and mannerisms. But your last names are different. That's why I thought you two must be living together as a couple."

It was clear now why Hirosue was angry. Matsuoka felt his clenched palms turn sweaty in his lap. Anyone was bound to get angry if he found out that a woman who was supposed to be his only lover, someone whom he had even proposed marriage to, was actually living with another man.

"To be honest, I'm in love with Ms. Yoko," Hirosue continued. "But it's almost a one-sided feeling, and I don't know how she really feels. That's why I think I'd be able to grasp things better if you explain to me what kind of relationship you have."

Matsuoka felt rescued when his coffee was brought to the table. At least he didn't have to talk while he drank. Matsuoka pretended to be occupied with his coffee while he thought about how to manoeuvre through this situation. Hirosue hadn't found out that Yoko was actually him in drag. Instead, the man was under the impression that Yoko had a boyfriend. As a priority, Matsuoka wanted to sort out the misunderstanding about the boyfriend, but had no idea what excuse to use.

The easiest excuse was to say they were siblings, but their last names were different. Suddenly, the word "cousins" emerged in his mind. If they were close cousins, it would be normal for them to visit each other.

"I'm actually Yoko Eto's cousin."

Matsuoka was sure Hirosue had heard, but there was no reaction from him.

"We've been close since we were kids," he continued, "so we still visit each other. Something came up, and she had to move out of her place on short notice. She's staying at my apartment until she finds a new place to live."

Matsuoka panicked. Here he was explaining that they were cousins, but the suspicion in Hirosue's eyes showed no signs of fading.

"And how long have you been like this for?"

"About a month?" Matsuoka said uncertainly.

Hirosue bit his lip and looked down.

"I don't think a woman would normally move into her male cousin's apartment, even if she had to move out on short notice."

The man was right, now that he mentioned it. But since Matsuoka couldn't think of any other reason why Yoko Eto might be in his apartment, he had no choice but to stick to his lie.

"We're really cousins. And..."

"You're contradicting yourself," the man said, quietly but with finality. "At first you said you didn't know who Yoko Eto was, but now you're saying you're actually cousins and you live together. I can't trust what you say."

There was nothing Matsuoka could do about that.

"I won't be surprised to hear that you're dating Ms. Yoko. I figured you were, and I'm prepared to hear it. Please don't lie. Tell me the truth. Please."

If I were to say we were dating, would this guy give up? Matsuoka thought on a whim.

"Do you love her that much?" he asked.

The man's face coloured slightly. "I think she's a wonderful person."

"She can't talk, you know."

"She might have a handicap, but she certainly doesn't act like it. She's a strong woman."

"She's pretty careless, and she'll flirt with anyone."

After a slight pause, Hirosue replied.

"Everyone has a selfish side of themselves. I have no intention of rejecting that. If that is part of what makes her who she is, then I'd want to love all of her."

Matsuoka's back burned in embarrassment to be told he was loved. He looked down to hide the blush creeping up his face. The man's frank words hit him straight in the heart.

"You really don't care what she turns out to be?" His voice trembled slightly.

"I can love her as long as she is who she is."

Matsuoka closed his eyes. They needed to draw the line. He reseated himself deeply in his seat, and let the tension leave his body.

"Why don't you talk about that kind of stuff between the two of you?"

Reluctance suddenly clouded Hirosue's face. After a short silence, he mumbled his answer.

"I don't want to get into an argument with her. If I can find out the truth, and if I can accept it, I don't plan on seeing her again."

Matsuoka hunched his shoulders.

"You might be fine with that, but what about Yoko? You say you don't want to get into an

argument, but you're just avoiding direct contact with her. No one likes getting into disagreements, but sometimes you need to."

Matsuoka stood from his seat.

"Talk the rest of it out with Yoko. That's all I can say."

Matsuoka put his coffee money on the table and left the shop. Hirosue did not come after him. Matsuoka clutched his cell phone the whole way to the station, and even after he boarded the train. When he got off at the station closest to his apartment, his phone finally rang. Matsuoka couldn't even wait to cross the road, and read the e-mail under the traffic light.

'It's been a while. I hope you've been well.' Hirosue's e-mail began in a somewhat distant manner. *'I'm sorry for sending you home the other day without even a decent conversation. Thank you for coming all the way to my house because you were worried about me. I want to ask you something very badly. Will you meet up with me?'*

What he had set into motion as Yosuke Matsuoka appeared directly as results. He immediately moved to send a reply, but stalled. Back at the coffee shop, he had thought it would be okay because Hirosue had confessed his love so many times. But would Hirosue still profess the same love if he revealed that he was Yoko Eto?

His swelling confidence evaporated at once.

Matsuoka put his cell phone in his pocket and returned to his apartment. While he brooded over his thoughts, he got another e-mail from Hirosue.

'I know you might be angry at me. But all I ask is that you to see me just once so we can talk.'

Matsuoka had been ready to confess just seconds ago. But he quailed in the moment of truth.

'There is something I have been hiding from you,' Matsuoka wrote. *'I know I have to see you and talk to you about it, but I'm so afraid that if I tell you, you won't love me anymore.'*

As soon as he sent the message, he received a reply as swift as an arrow.

'No matter what you tell me, I won't be able to stop loving you.' The e-mail looked like the picture of Hirosue's unshakable feelings. But Matsuoka still pressed his point.

'I know that it's my fault. In my mind, I understand that there's nothing I can do if you stop loving me because of it. But I'm still afraid.'

He received another immediate reply.

'No matter who you are, even if you're a criminal, I don't think I could bring myself to hate you. If you're hiding secrets in your heart—whatever bad things they may be—it won't change the fact that I want to be with you. I want us to work through it together.'

Maybe things would be alright with this man. *He loves me, loves me so much... and since he does—maybe he'll forgive me.*

'I'm often fortunate to be told that I'm beautiful. Is it the same with you as well? Is it my face that you like?' Matsuoka knew he was being a little too persistent, but he sent the e-mail anyway.

'I think you're a beautiful person. But I'm attracted more to your heart than your appearance. I'm attracted to your just, resilient, and gentle heart.'

Matsuoka read the e-mail several times, slowly and with great care.

'I love you, too,' he wrote back. *'If I were an eighty-year-old woman, or a little child, or someone who doesn't deserve you, would you still love me?'*

Matsuoka smiled a little at the reply.

'Ms. Yoko, even if you grow old, or turn into a child, no matter what form you take, I will probably still end up searching you out and falling in love with you.'

Urged on by the man's many, gentle words, Matsuoka sent an e-mail.

'I want to see you, too. Please meet up with me. When we do, I'll tell you everything truthfully.'

They agreed to meet in a hotel lobby. Matsuoka chose the place. He had a room reserved upstairs, but he decided they would meet downstairs first.

They had agreed to meet at seven in the evening, but Matsuoka couldn't wait and was down in the lobby at six-thirty. Taking a seat on the sofa didn't make him any calmer, and every time he sensed the main doors of the hotel opening, he turned around to look. At first he had been filled with anticipation at Hirosue's arrival, but the closer it got to their meeting time, the more he began to dread it.

I don't want to see him. Maybe I should just go home. The thought circled round and round in his head. Matsuoka rose halfway out of his seat, but ended up sitting back down.

At five minutes to seven, his cell phone suddenly rang. It was an e-mail from Hirosue.

'It's taking a little longer to finish my work. I'll be about thirty minutes late. I'm sorry,' it said.

'You don't have to rush. Be careful on your way here,' Matsuoka replied, sinking deeply in his seat. *This is the last time I have to pretend I'm a woman in my e-mails,* Matsuoka thought absently. He had reserved a room partly because he would rather talk about crossdressing in private, but also because he had in mind what was to come.

If Hirosue accepted him for who he was and still wanted Matsuoka physically, Matsuoka was willing to have sex with him. He had prepared everything that was needed for sex between two males. He was exasperated at himself for being this way, but those were his honest feelings, and there was nothing he could do about that.

Matsuoka had a feeling Hirosue would accept him. The man had said it didn't matter if he was an old woman or a child, as long as he was "him". Hirosue seemed like the last person to go back on his word, but Matsuoka couldn't help but harbour a fragment of doubt in his heart.

At about fifteen minutes past seven, he heard hurried footsteps in the lobby. Matsuoka turned around to see Hirosue running in his direction. The man anxiously glanced around at the chairs in the lounge.

"Good evening," Matsuoka called out to Hirosue, who was now pacing uncertainly, unable to find Yoko Eto here.

"Uh, um..."

"You're meeting up with Yoko, right? I'll take you to the room."

"Oh. Alright." Hirosue was still out of breath as he followed Matsuoka. The man was still panting after they got on the elevator. It was cold outside, but a thin sheen of sweat coated Hirosue's brow. Just knowing that the man had come running in a hurry just for their meeting filled Matsuoka with tender yearning.

"Is Ms. Yoko in the room?"

Matsuoka did not answer. Once Hirosue sensed that he was being ignored, he didn't try to press any further. Matsuoka got out of the elevator and led the man to the hotel room. Once inside, Hirosue took a sweeping look at the room, then turned around to Matsuoka, who was standing behind him.

"Where's Ms. Yoko?"

Matsuoka knew it was only natural for the man to do this, but it wasn't very pleasant, to say the least, to see Hirosue search for Yoko Eto in such an obvious manner.

"I want to talk to you. Please have a seat."

Hirosue did as he was told and sat down in a nearby chair. His gaze was clouded in uncertainty as he stared at Matsuoka.

"I'll jump right to the conclusion. The Yoko Eto you're thinking of is not coming today."

The man stood from his seat and practically lunged at Matsuoka.

"Why not?" he demanded. "She and I agreed to meet here today."

"Calm yourself and just sit down, alright?"

Matsuoka pushed Hirosue by the shoulders and forced him to sit back down.

"I had a bad feeling about this," Hirosue muttered. "I was worried, really worried about whether I could really see her..."

Matsuoka patted him lightly on the shoulder, purely as a consoling gesture. But the man lifted his face and looked at Matsuoka almost angrily.

"Who *are* you?"

Matsuoka was stuck for words.

"I came here to see Ms. Yoko. Why are you here instead? Did she say she didn't even want to see me or talk to me directly? Is that what she said?"

"No, she didn't. But—"

"Then, why are you here? Are you her lover, after all?"

Matsuoka had planned to take more time to talk about himself, but Hirosue's confusion seemed to be getting worse.

"I'm going to tell you, but can you take it calmly?" Matsuoka asked.

Hirosue's lips moved to say something more, but pursed together vaguely. The stage was set. Matsuoka took a slow breath.

"Yoko Eto doesn't exist."

"You're lying. I've met her several times—"

"I'm Yoko Eto," Matsuoka interrupted.

Hirosue tilted his head, his brow still furrowed.

"It was me. I dressed up as a woman and called myself Yoko Eto."

Hirosue's mouth gaped open. He wore a disoriented expression, like he had just woken up from an enchantment.

"I happened to be dressed like a woman the first time we met," Matsuoka said. "And I was never able to bring up the fact that I was a man until we got this far."

"That's absurd," Hirosue murmured. "Your faces are different."

"They're the same. I probably look different because I don't have makeup on."

"And the length of your hair..."

"That was a wig. I couldn't grow out my actual hair. That's why I told you not to touch it, remember?"

Hirosue stared intently at Matsuoka and shook his head. "No, you're lying," he said adamantly. "She's smaller, and soft, and her voice..."

"You'd be able to tell I was a man by my voice, so I lied and said I couldn't talk."

Hirosue's face contorted as if he was about to cry. He put his hands on the table and cradled his head.

"I can't believe it. I can't believe anything anymore."

"You might not be able to, but it's true."

Hirosue slumped over in silence. Matsuoka went on to talk in great detail about their relationship, from when they first met to the present day. He kept talking, figuring that Hirosue would begin to accept that he was Yoko Eto if he talked about things only the two of them would know.

Yet, gradually Hirosue even stopped grunting in reply, and Matsuoka was left at a complete loss.

"If you still can't believe me, I can turn into Yoko Eto right here. I'll have to put on makeup, so you'll have to wait for me to bring my makeup kit from my house."

"It's alright," Hirosue declined feebly. "I understand that you're Ms. Yoko. That answers everything I've been baffled about. It makes sense."

So he had managed to make Hirosue understand that he and Yoko Eto were the same person.

"I didn't mean to trick you. But how things were and the way we met—I just couldn't find the right time to tell you the truth. I'm sorry. I didn't want you to find out I had such an embarrassing hobby like crossdressing. I didn't want you to think worse of me."

Hirosue did not lift his bowed head.

"I'm really sorry," Matsuoka repeated. "But I'm serious about how I feel for you, Mr. Hirosue."

Matsuoka's confession was not met with an answer.

"You know, just because I crossdress, it doesn't mean that I'm transsexual or that I'm gay. There was just this point in my life when I was just really exhausted from work, and I used to let off some steam by dressing like a woman."

"Can I..." Hirosue lifted his face. "Can I think about this alone?"

Matsuoka exited the room, leaving the man inside. Since he couldn't just stand in the hallway, he went down to the lounge cafe on the first floor and sipped on a coffee.

Matsuoka had expected a degree of damage, but Hirosue seemed to be taking it harder than he had imagined. *Well, he has to deal with the fact that someone whom he thought was a woman was actually a man. It's only natural,* he consoled himself.

If their positions had been reversed, he knew he would have felt the same way. He wished he could get the man to accept the truth soon so they could move on to the next step.

Matsuoka spent about thirty minutes in the lounge cafe before returning to the room. He was shocked at what he saw. The room was dark, and there was no one there.

When he realized that the man had left without him, he was overcome with a sense of futility.

He look at this cell phone, but there were no new messages. He hastily gave Hirosue a call. The man picked up after five rings.

"This is Matsuoka speaking," he said, and the man was silent for a few moments. "If you were going to go home, I wish you would've at least said something to me."

"I did leave a..." the man faltered on the other end. "I did leave a note on the table."

Matsuoka searched and found a note left behind on the hotel memo pad, saying, 'I hope you'll excuse me, but I am going home. I'm sorry.'

"I'm really sorry," the man said as Matsuoka read the note. "I knew it was a bad thing to do, but it was hard for me to talk to you face-to-face."

"But—"

"Goodbye." The line went dead.

"Hey, wh—"

Matsuoka had initiated the call, but Hirosue had hung up without even waiting for him. Even if their conversation was over, it was still a rude thing to do.

Matsuoka was angry, but he also understood that the man needed to come to terms with a whole new set of facts. Matsuoka decided to let it slide out of consideration for him. The guilt of deceiving the man weighed just as heavily on him as well.

After the confession, Matsuoka received no word from Hirosue that night apart from the phone call that he had made.

The next day, he did not so much as get an e-mail. He considered calling the man himself, but decided against it. Judging by the man's helplessness at Matsuoka's confession, it would probably only upset him more if Matsuoka contacted him again. So Matsuoka restrained himself and waited.

Two days passed in that manner, then three; soon, Matsuoka began to feel uncertain. He had decided to tell Hirosue in the first place because the man had said he would love Matsuoka even if he was an old woman or a child. But Hirosue's attitude was nothing like he had imagined.

Finally, on the fourth day, Matsuoka was unable to wait any longer. He sent a casual e-mail saying, 'It was cold this morning, wasn't it?'. He sent the e-mail in the morning, but did not receive a reply for the whole day.

On the fifth day, Matsuoka called Hirosue at around eight in the evening. No one picked up after ten rings on the line. When he waited about thirty minutes and called back again, he was sent straight to voicemail.

He sensed that Hirosue had turned his voicemail on because he knew Matsuoka was calling. Matsuoka was hurt, but at the same time, angered.

'*Are you not answering your phone on purpose?*' he wrote in an e-mail. He figured he would definitely get an answer this time, but there was no response.

On the sixth day, Matsuoka arranged his last sales visit to be close to Koishikawa Lab. After finishing work, he called the office to say he was going straight home, then headed immediately to the lab. It was past six, and the reception desk was deserted. Matsuoka waited for Hirosue outside the entrance, where a dusting of snow had started to dance in the air.

He snagged a man who looked like a worker on his way out of the building.

"Is Mr. Hirosue from General Administration still in there?" Matsuoka asked him.

"Yeah, he's still staying behind," the man answered. Once Matsuoka knew for sure that he would be able to see the man, waiting in the snow didn't seem so unpleasant.

Past seven o'clock, he sensed someone come out of the building. An awkwardly-fitting coat and the strange cowlick on the back of his head—it was Hirosue, no doubt about it.

"Good evening," Matsuoka called out to him. The man stopped in his tracks. When he recognized Matsuoka, he made a clear grimace. Matsuoka was hurt, but made none of it show as he approached Hirosue.

"I e-mailed you, but you didn't answer."

The man stared at his feet. "I'm sorry," he apologized.

"I don't know what's going on inside your head, Mr. Hirosue. So I was expecting some kind of response."

"I'm sorry." The man apologized over and over, but no other words followed.

"I think we need to sit down and have a proper conversation about it. Are you free right now?"

Hirosue looked at his watch. "The bus," he said in a small voice. "The last bus is coming soon."

Matsuoka felt a jab of irritation at his excuse.

"You're saying you can't talk to me because the bus is coming?"

"N-No, it's not that. The transportation around here isn't that good, and the taxis don't come around often, either. That's why—"

"I'll take the bus back, too, then. Partway," Matsuoka snapped quietly. Hirosue made a troubled expression again.

"But—"

"I'll take the bus back to your area. That's more convenient for you, right?" he insisted forcefully. Hirosue did not fight back. They walked to the bus stop nearby, and arrived just as the bus was pulling up. True to Hirosue's word, this bus appeared to be the last one, and was crowded with riders. They started out standing close to each other, but the moving throng gradually pulled them apart.

Even inside the bus, Hirosue's gaze remained directed out the window. After about a thirty-minute ride, they got off. Matsuoka could see Hirosue's apartment from where they were.

"Would you like to go into a cafe or something?" the man finally asked cautiously, after the stretch of silence on the bus.

"I'm hungry, so I'd like to eat something."

"There's a family restaurant nearby, so we can go there."

Matsuoka knew where the family restaurant was without Hirosue telling him. He had gone there with the man a number of times before, as Yoko Eto.

They started out walking side-by-side down the road to the restaurant, but before Matsuoka knew it, he was walking ahead of the man. He slowed his gait a little, but the gap between them did not close. When he had been Yoko Eto, they had walked snugly beside each other, even holding hands. All of it seemed hard to believe now.

They went inside. Matsuoka ordered grilled ginger pork set, and Hirosue ordered a grilled fish

set. They sat across from each other, but Hirosue did not make eye contact with him. He either looked down or looked aside.

"You still don't want to acknowledge that I'm Yoko Eto?"

Hirosue finally looked at him. He was chewing his lip lightly.

"It's not a question about acknowledgement. It's the truth, so I don't think I have a choice."

Over these six days, Matsuoka had felt like he had been accepted. But the way Hirosue said "I don't have a choice" got on his nerves.

"I usually don't like to complain after the fact, but it would've been nice if you replied to my e-mails," Matsuoka said icily.

"I'm sorry," Hirosue apologized.

"And with the phone? I wish you would've told me that you didn't want to hear my voice instead of avoiding me like that."

"I'm sorry," Hirosue apologized again. Matsuoka could not detect any sincerity from his flat tone. *He's just apologizing for the sake of apologizing*, he thought.

"Do you hate me, or something?" Matsuoka asked frankly. The man shook his head ever so slightly.

"It's on a whole different level from hate or anything like that."

"No, it isn't. You either like me or hate me, am I wrong?"

Hirosue lifted his face. "I can't understand you."

"Understand...?"

"I can't understand why you were... wearing women's clothes, or why you kept lying to me, or why you told me you loved me in that last e-mail..."

Their orders were brought, interrupting the conversation momentarily. Hirosue started on his meal. Unable to pressure the man to keep talking, Matsuoka started to eat as well. He had been famished until moments ago, but now he was so occupied with Hirosue's next words that he found it difficult to eat.

"Your chopsticks—" the man murmured. Matsuoka looked up. "I feel like the way you use your chopsticks and the way you eat is like Ms. Yoko."

Matsuoka felt a twinge of irritation at being called Yoko. No matter how much he told the man Yoko was gone, that such a woman never existed, Hirosue still searched for signs of Yoko Eto in Matsuoka's mannerisms.

When he realized that he was being looked at not for himself but for the way he ate, Matsuoka lost his appetite even more, and ended up leaving most of his meal uneaten. Hirosue finished his meal and looked at Matsuoka, who had put his chopsticks down quite a while ago.

"Are you done?" Hirosue asked. Matsuoka nodded. "Let's leave, then," the man said without pause, getting out of his seat.

"I don't think our conversation is finished yet."

"I don't think we should talk about it here," Hirosue murmured hesitantly. He was right; it certainly wasn't good idea to talk about love and crossdressing in public. Matsuoka got up and followed Hirosue. They ended up not speaking a word to each other on the street until they arrived at Hirosue's apartment.

Hirosue's discomfort showed in his attitude. Even though his room was familiar to Matsuoka, he felt strangely restless after he had taken his seat in front of the *kotatsu*.

Matsuoka felt like he could use something to drink, but Hirosue showed no signs of preparing anything. He remembered how back when he was Yoko Eto, the man would constantly ask him, "Would you like tea? Or coffee?" to the point that it was annoying. The thought made him feel forlorn.

Hirosue took off his coat and sat down across from Matsuoka. He did not enter the *kotatsu*.

"I told you back at the restaurant that I don't understand you," Hirosue said. "At this point, that's all I have to say."

"What don't you understand? My crossdressing?"

Hirosue nodded vaguely. "As for crossdressing, I think I can accept that some people would have... abnormal tastes. I think I can understand that much. But what I don't understand is your attitude—"

"What about my attitude don't you understand?"

Hirosue clasped his hands tightly in his lap.

"I was convinced that you were a woman, so I was active about getting close to you. But you already knew how this would end, didn't you? Why didn't you dump me the moment I told you I loved you?"

Matsuoka thought it was unfair of him to bring that up now. Hirosue had said he didn't mind if Matsuoka was in love with someone else.

"It's true that you tried to distance yourself. But you approached me again and you were kind to me. I thought you finally felt the same way towards me, and I was happy. I was happy, but—"

"I'm sorry about that. But I really couldn't bring myself to say—"

"Did you think I wouldn't be shocked at finding out you were a man?" Hirosue accused. "It was my first time falling in love with someone who loved me back. I was giddy. I even seriously considered getting married. I thought about buying a house, how many children we'd have. Nice way to make a fool out of myself, isn't it?" His tone was quiet, but simmering with anger. "If you knew this was going to happen someday, why did you kiss me? Why did you look at me like you really cared for me, act like you enjoyed my attention? You even told me you *loved* me."

Matsuoka bit his lip. "You're right. I did."

"Were you teasing me? Making fun of me?"

"Of course not!" Matsuoka exclaimed angrily.

"But you said you aren't gay or transsexual, so there's no way you can love me. That means your talk about love is all a lie. Right?"

The e-mails with no reply. The voicemail. Matsuoka finally realized that these were embodiments of Hirosue's anger. Hirosue was angry at him. Angry that Matsuoka had tricked him, angry that he was a man. About everything.

"I know what kind of person you are, Mr. Hirosue. How could I make fun of you, knowing that?"

"But you—"

"My feelings—!" He overrode the man's voice with loud words. "All of my feelings are in the e-mails I sent you before I confessed to you. I'm not lying. I wore women's clothes, but I never wanted to

become a woman. I'll never crossdress again. And I've never fallen in love with a man before. So you're special, Mr. Hirosue."

They both looked down in silence.

"You're neither gay nor transsexual, but as an exception, you've fallen in love with me. Isn't that too convenient to be true?" The question sounded more directed at himself than at Matsuoka.

"Remember what you said in your e-mail before I confessed that I'm a man, Mr. Hirosue? 'I'd probably fall in love with you, even if you were an old woman or a child.' That's why I made the decision to tell you."

Hirosue cradled his head. Matsuoka knew his words bordered on threatening, but he couldn't help but say them.

"It's true," Hirosue said weakly. "I did say that I could love you no matter what form you took. I really did feel that way, and there's no lie in how I felt then. But..."

Matsuoka's heart trembled in fear at what was to come next. But silence wore on without Hirosue lifting his face. Matsuoka was forced to deal with how wrongly optimistic he had been—and what reality was like.

"Let's start over like we're back at square one." That was all Matsuoka could say. "Yoko Eto never existed. Let's start from there."

There was no answer, as he expected.

"—Say something, will you?"

The man's answer came after a pause. "Dunno." It was apathetic. They remained sitting across from each other, but it was starting to become painful to converse with an unresponsive man.

"I'm going home."

Hirosue lifted his face when Matsuoka stood up, but that was all he did. He said nothing.

"I'll e-mail or call you." *You don't have to feel pressured to answer*, Matsuoka was about to say, then didn't. He was afraid that the man would really stop responding if he did.

"See you."

He left the apartment, and felt the door close when he pulled it behind him, which made him almost cry. Back when he was Yoko Eto, he would never have gone to the station alone. The man always insisted on walking him no matter how much he refused. In fact, he did it so enthusiastically that he probably would have followed Matsuoka home if Matsuoka didn't say a firm goodbye at the station.

He was heartbroken by Hirosue's change in attitude, but he consoled himself by deciding there was nothing he could do. They were probably at the lowest point right now. Things would start getting better from here. He and Yoko Eto were the same person. They looked different, but they were the same on the inside—if he and Hirosue could get to know each other more, he believed Hirosue would someday realize that.

Matsuoka sent two e-mails a day—one in the morning and one in the evening. Hirosue only sent one response, which seemed to be out of obligation towards Matsuoka.

Matsuoka sent e-mails every day. Sometimes he called, but they could never have a decent

conversation because the other man would soon lapse into silence.

Hirosue only sends one reply because I e-mail him about things that don't really need an answer. Our phone conversations don't last very long because he's just not very good at talking. That's all, Matsuoka told himself over and over like a mantra.

He always eagerly anticipated Hirosue's replies. When they were more aloof than usual, it cast a gloom over his mood. But Matsuoka did not think to stop e-mailing him; he knew that if he did, they would probably lose touch altogether.

One day in mid-March, two weeks into their relationship of exchanging e-mails and the very occasional phone call, Matsuoka failed to receive even the single e-mail per day that Hirosue sent. This worried him—Hirosue had sent one every day until now—but he felt like he would be exaggerating if he called the man and interrogated him just for not sending an e-mail. So he restrained himself.

The next day, he received an e-mail in the evening. Matsuoka was relieved, but on the following day, there was no e-mail again. Instead, he got a reply the day after that. Gradually, it became normal for him to get a reply every other day. That became two days. The gap steadily grew wider between each reply.

Matsuoka felt like Hirosue was intentionally leading their relationship towards an end, and began to purposely send e-mails that required a reply. Hirosue sent punctilious answers to those, but if he didn't need to, the gaps widened between each e-mail again.

Matsuoka knew he had to do something soon, so he invited Hirosue out to eat. 'How about dinner together, since it's been a while?' he wrote. He had not seen Hirosue at all since that day in the end of February when he had made his intrusive visit to the man's workplace.

Every invite Matsuoka sent was turned down with an excuse—"My work won't end until late," or "I'm busy." On his fifth invite, the man finally replied, "I'll go."

Matsuoka was simply happy to see Hirosue again. For the restaurant, he went out of his way to choose the *izakaya* near headquarters, which Hirosue had frequented before. They were to meet at seven in the evening in front of the station. Tiny cherry blossoms bloomed adorably in the trees planted in the street. Amongst the people coming and going in the station, he could spot many young people being dwarfed by their new suits. Matsuoka arrived fifteen minutes early; on the contrary, Hirosue arrived fifteen minutes late.

"I'm sorry. My bus was late," Hirosue apologized when he saw Matsuoka. He wasn't out of breath, nor was his hair dishevelled. There was a bit of distance between the bus stop and this spot; Matsuoka could tell that Hirosue hadn't bothered to run even though he was late, but he couldn't bring himself to criticize the man for it.

The little things bothered him, but Matsuoka was still happy to see Hirosue's face again. However, Hirosue looked anything but excited for their meal. His attitude screamed of one who had come out for the sake of politeness because he had been invited so many times. Matsuoka refused to let the man's apathetic attitude diminish his spirits.

"Let's go, then."

Matsuoka wasn't bothered that the man walked behind him, either. *It's not normal for men to walk side-by-side, anyway,* he thought to himself. Once they got to the restaurant, they would be sitting across from each other whether Hirosue liked it or not. He only had to feel lonely on the walk there.

That was what he told himself.

When they arrived at the restaurant, they were shown to a table instead of the counter because they had a reservation. Matsuoka inwardly swore when he realized it was the same table they had sat at when he came here with Hirosue for the first time in female form. But all the seats in the restaurant were occupied, so he wasn't going to be selfish and ask to have their seats changed.

The awkward air lingered as they sat in the same spots as before. Hirosue looked even glummer than when Matsuoka had first seen him today. Matsuoka renewed his attitude and acted cheerful, trying his best not to get dragged down along with him.

"What do you feel like eating? The fish was really good here, wasn't it? Feel free to pick anything you like, Mr. Hirosue."

Hirosue threw a glance at the menu.

"I don't feel like eating fish today," he muttered.

"Oh, then by all means, pick something else. How about *motsunikomi*¹³ or grilled egg? I feel like eating salad, so I'll order a *jako*¹⁴ salad. What do you want to drink?"

"I'll have a beer," Hirosue mumbled. Once they finished giving their orders, their drinks and appetizers were brought out first. They did not clink glasses, but instead made brief eye contact before bringing their drinks to their lips.

After taking one draught, Hirosue put his beer glass down on the table. His face was turned slightly to the side, and he did not even try to look at Matsuoka. He didn't seem keen to start a conversation, either.

"Was the financial closing this year hard on you guys at the lab, too?" Matsuoka started with a harmless topic.

"I guess so. I just transferred to the lab last year, so I can't tell yet whether it's hard or not."

"Alright, sure," Matsuoka conceded. "The end of the fiscal year is always tough, you know, because that's when you're faced with everything you've put off for the whole year. I'm somewhat alright because I manage to meet my quota every month, but other people seem to have it pretty hard. Employers are stricter nowadays, too."

Hirosue bobbed his head slightly in response.

"Especially when it comes to Sales, you know, it's a nice feeling to secure a contract, but I never feel any enormous sense of accomplishment. We're kind of like sales counter people. The products are already finished—our job is just to sell them. I know it's a necessary position, but still, you know?"

Matsuoka glanced up at Hirosue. "But if you work in a lab, I'm sure you get the sense that you're actually producing something. I think that's a pretty motivating job."

"I'm just a clerk."

Matsuoka's attempt at flattery was easily deflected.

"Yeah, sure, but I'm sure that feeling rubs off when you watch the people in Research and Development work, right?"

"Not really," Hirosue muttered, taking a swig of his beer.

"Okay. Well, I got put into Sales because selling things is the only thing I'm good at, but

13 Stewed innards. Typically beef, pork, or chicken.

14 Dried small sardines.

nowadays I think it would have been nice to be in R&D."

Hirosue spoke at a ratio of about one-to-nine to Matsuoka. Every topic Matsuoka brought up was met with a one-word answer. He could clearly tell that Hirosue was not in the mood to have an active conversation. But as long as they were sitting together like this, Matsuoka felt like he needed to keep talking about something.

"You guys had new researchers coming in in April¹⁵ over at Koishikawa, right?"

"I think so..."

"Are a lot of them from graduate school, or someplace like that?"

"I don't know."

"You haven't asked?"

Hirosue sighed heavily. Matsuoka could almost hear him say, *I'm sick and tired of this.*

"I don't really talk about education levels with people at the lab. —Can I eat a little?"

"Oh—sure."

Matsuoka felt a strange nagging sense at the way Hirosue spoke. He hadn't been talking about education at all; he was only curious.

The *motsunikomi* had been left on the table while they were talking. Matsuoka brought the slightly-cooled food to his lips. It was supposed to taste the same as before, but somehow he didn't find it as good.

"I'm really sorry. All our seats are full right now," Matsuoka heard the owner say. He looked up to see Fukuda, Hirosue's former boss and a member of Matsuoka's cohort.

He cursed inwardly and averted his eyes.

"Hey, Matsuoka, is that you?"

The sharp-eyed man had spotted him. Matsuoka couldn't ignore him now that he had been spoken to. Fukuda was even approaching their table.

"I didn't know you knew about this place, too," Fukuda murmured as he tossed a glance at the man sitting across from him. Hirosue inclined his head slightly.

"It's been a while," he said.

"It has," said Fukuda, barely acknowledging the man's presence before turning to Matsuoka. "I was wondering," he drawled. "My girlfriend is dying to eat here. Apparently this place was featured in a magazine as a hideaway that serves good food. Would you mind if we sat with you guys?"

Matsuoka hesitated to answer because he wanted to enjoy the meal alone with Hirosue. But the man across from him answered instead.

"We don't mind."

"Oh, really? I'll bring her over, then." Fukuda promptly went back to the entrance and brought a woman back. It wasn't Okabayashi, so he had apparently gotten a new girlfriend. True to Fukuda's preference for good looks, she was above-average in terms of her face, if that gave her any credit.

"I'm sorry. I hope we're not intruding," she gave a friendly smile to Hirosue and Matsuoka. She seemed to be amiable, at least.

Now with people beside him, Hirosue talked even less. Fukuda and his girlfriend, conversely, laughed often at nothing in particular. Perhaps they were still in the beginning stages of dating.

¹⁵ April is hiring season for new graduates.

"Hey," Fukuda began, "I've wanted to ask you this before, but how do you guys know each other? You're over at Koishikawa now, Mr. Hirosue, so you guys don't have much of a chance to run into each other, do you?" Fukuda started to talk to them once his conversation lapsed with his girlfriend, who had begun to eat. Matsuoka wasn't about to tell him that he used to go out with the man in drag, so he threw together a convenient story.

"I go to Koishikawa sometimes for sales visits. That's where I met Mr. Hirosue."

"Isn't Koishikawa, like, twenty minutes away from here?" Fukuda murmured, then turned to Hirosue. "If you can finish work and still make it down here at this time, that must mean you end pretty early, don't you?"

Hirosue didn't ignore the remark that was directed at him.

"It might be earlier compared to when I was in General Affairs."

"Oh, man, you're so lucky," Fukuda said, hunching his shoulders as if he had been waiting for that answer. "I'm so jealous of General Administration people who work at labs. You guys end early and you don't seem too busy, either. I wish I could work over there."

He didn't mean a word of what he said, but that was the kind of man Fukuda was. He was one to talk, considering he had pulled the strings to ship Hirosue off to Koishikawa.

"Come to think of it, Sales is pretty good, too. You get to slack off all you want outside."

Fukuda's girlfriend took his utterance at face value.

"Is it really like that in Sales?" she asked Matsuoka in amazement.

"Yeah," Fukuda answered for him. "You're pretty much free to do whatever you want with your time for the whole day."

That's just your assumption of Sales, Matsuoka wanted to retort, but he grinned and endured it.

"Why don't you come over to Sales, too, huh?" he said to Fukuda. "It's tough at the end of the fiscal year, but otherwise it's smooth sailing."

"Yeah, but you know," Fukuda murmured. "I *am* the chief of General Affairs, after all."

"You'd do fine in Sales," Matsuoka said in a half-hearted attempt to flatter him. If Fukuda happened to be encouraged enough to transfer to Sales, he would no doubt be ensnared and dragged down by the monthly quotas from hell. It would serve him right, indeed.

Matsuoka glanced at the table during his conversation with Fukuda and realized Hirosue's glass was empty.

"Oh, Mr. Hirosue. How about something to drink?"

"Beer," Hirosue answered, so Matsuoka ordered another of the same. After he gave the order, he realized how red the man's lowered face was. He had a feeling the man should start slackening his pace, but since he was only on his third glass, Matsuoka didn't mention anything.

"Say, Mr. Hirosue, didn't you have a girlfriend?" Fukuda said. "That tall, thin girl with fair skin," he said jabbing his conversational feelers into a topic Matsuoka had not wanted to touch.

"No," Hirosue said flatly, denying Yoko Eto's existence with vehemence.

"Huh? But you did. That was all our department was talking about after the farewell party. Like about where you met and stuff."

"She's not my girlfriend."

Fukuda cocked his head. "Okay," he said. "So she wasn't your girlfriend. Now that you

mention it, I guess it make sense. She was too pretty, almost doll-like. You two looked kind of mismatched standing together."

Fukuda was being rude, but Hirosue showed no signs of getting angry.

"Well, you might not be dating, but you're still acquaintances, right?"

"Right. But she broke up with me, so I don't really want to talk about it."

Matsuoka didn't miss Fukuda smirk.

"Mr. Hirosue, maybe you aimed too high."

"Maybe I did."

Fukuda grinned smugly again at Hirosue's reply. Conversation appeared to be humming at their table, but Fukuda was the only one actually talking. Hirosue didn't talk unless he was spoken to, and Matsuoka only interjected in response.

"Can I have another drink, please? Kikusui this time."

Matsuoka glanced at Hirosue's hand and noticed that his beer glass, which had been full seconds ago, was already empty. The man's ears were beet-red. Matsuoka continued to watch as the man's right hand, holding his chopsticks, tried and failed twice to clamp a piece of pickled vegetable that came with the grilled rice balls.

"Are you sure you should be drinking that much?" Matsuoka whispered to him, but the man was deaf to him and did not answer. When his glass of cold *sake* was brought, he downed it in one continuous draught.

"Excuse me, I'd like another one of the same, please," he called over to a server passing by.

"Shouldn't you lay off a bit?" Matsuoka said concernedly. "You still have work tomorrow. It's going to be hell if you get a hangover."

Hirosue lifted his face. "It's none of your concern whether I have a hard time tomorrow because I'm hung over, is it?" he said coldly. Matsuoka was speechless. Fukuda, who had been listening to them, intervened.

"Hey," he said. "That's no way to talk. Matsuoka's just worried about you, Mr. Hirosue," he reprimanded.

"You're right," Hirosue muttered in a voice that lacked any sincerity, and drained the new glass of cold *sake* like water. He fumbled with his empty glass, which slipped out of his hand and fell to the floor. There was no doubt about his inebriation now.

"Whoa!" As Hirosue drew back to pick up the glass, which was luckily not broken, he swayed and leaned heavily against Fukuda.

"Geez, Mr. Hirosue, how drunk *are* you?" Fukuda wrinkled his brow, not even trying to hide his displeasure.

"I'm sorry—" Hirosue apologized, but his body still teetered as if he were on a ship. Unable to watch any longer, Matsuoka stood from his seat and went around the table to Hirosue's side.

"Mr. Hirosue, can you make it over here?"

Hirosue glanced at Matsuoka, but did not listen to him. His body, however, continued to rock back and forth, weighing down on Fukuda beside him.

"God, you're heavy," the man complained.

Matsuoka went over to the man who refused to lean on him, forced him to stand, and brought

him out to the aisle.

"Mr. Hirosue's pretty drunk, so I think we're going to head home."

Please do, Fukuda's face seemed to say. "Alright, then. See you," he said with a wave. Hirosue by now could not even stand on his feet. Matsuoka sat him on a chair near the cash register and paid for both of them. Hirosue resisted being touched, but Matsuoka forcefully took his shoulder and exited the restaurant.

"I can... walk by myself..." Contrary to his words, Hirosue staggered back and forth like he was dancing. Matsuoka disregarded the words of the drunk, took his shoulder, and walked along slowly.

The intoxicated man was heavy to carry. Matsuoka wished they could reach the main road quickly so they could hail a taxi. Just then, he heard a foreboding muffled belch from the man beside him.

Hirosue's face was pale as he pressed a hand to his mouth. Matsuoka hastily took him into the hedges in the middle of the path, where Hirosue doubled over and threw up. Matsuoka rubbed the man's back the whole time as he vomited over and over. The man finally finished emptying the contents of his stomach. He retched, but nothing came up. Matsuoka sat Hirosue down on the stairs at the entrance of a five-storey building and looked for a vending machine. He bought a bottle of water and returned to the man's side.

"Rinse your mouth out with this."

Hirosue took the water from him and stumbled back to the hedges, where he rinsed his mouth out. He squatted down on the spot. Matsuoka half-carried Hirosue away from the middle of the road back to the stairs, where he wouldn't get in the way of other people.

"Do you still feel sick?" he asked, sitting down beside the man.

"A little..." came the answer. If he put Hirosue on a taxi now, the motion would probably make him sick again. Matsuoka decided it was better to stay here for a while to let the alcohol leave his system.

Hirosue stretched out on the stairs, not even minding the dirt on his clothes. *Hope he has an extra suit he can wear tomorrow to work*, Matsuoka found himself worrying, though he knew it wasn't any of his business.

"You have no problem telling lies, do you," Hirosue mumbled. Matsuoka turned around. "You lied to Mr. Fukuda. You said you came to Koishikawa for a sale visit and that's how you got to know me."

Matsuoka wondered why the man was bringing this up now.

"What else could I have done? I wasn't going to tell him I was dressing in drag."

"It doesn't matter how big or how small—a lie is still a lie."

It annoyed him that the man was hung up on something so insignificant.

"What, are you saying I should have told him we met each other when I was crossdressing? Make him scorn me and laugh at me?"

"That's not what I meant."

"That's exactly what it means when you tell me not to lie!" Matsuoka yelled at him. Hirosue held his head in his hands and closed his mouth. An awkward silence fell between them. Matsuoka chewed his lip and looked out at the main road before them, following the continuous line of cars

with his eyes.

"I didn't feel like going to work today," the man said abruptly. He had been so silent until now, Matsuoka had thought he had fallen asleep. "I felt depressed when I thought about having to meet you this evening."

Matsuoka felt his chest wring painfully.

"I wondered why I had to meet with you when I didn't even want to see your face, when we didn't even have anything to talk about. I wanted to stop e-mailing you, but you'd always reply back, so..."

He knew the man had been unwilling from the beginning. But it was still painful to hear it directly from him.

"So do you hate me, then, Mr. Hirosue?"

There was no answer.

"If you hate me, say so."

By refusing to answer, Matsuoka felt like the man was avoiding confrontation. It was underhanded of the man to do so, he thought.

"Say it, god damn it!" he snarled.

Hirosue shook his head in annoyance and lurched to his feet. He was still teetering slightly, but the vomiting had apparently helped some of the alcohol leave his system, for he could manage to walk by himself.

"I'm going home." With those words, Hirosue approached the edge of the sidewalk. He raised his right hand, trying to flag an empty taxi.

"Wait a minute. You think you're just going to have the last word and leave?"

"Please leave me alone."

A taxi flashed its signals and slowed down. It arrived at a stop in front of Hirosue. As the man fled into the back seat, Matsuoka followed right behind him and forced himself into the seat beside him.

"Your house is in the opposite direction, Mr. Matsuoka."

"Our conversation isn't over yet."

As they bickered back and forth, the taxi driver turned around with an unimpressed look.

"Can I get going now?" he said in a raised voice.

"Please," Matsuoka answered. The taxi lurched into motion.

"Can you take us to Sambashi Station on the Hikaridai line for now, please?" Matsuoka told the cab driver the nearest station to Hirosue's apartment. Hirosue threw him a glance before sighing heavily and looking out the window.

Hirosue fell asleep again not even five minutes into the ride, and as the car made a turn, Hirosue lurched and fell limply on Matsuoka's shoulder. He kept sliding further down until he was snoring with Matsuoka's lap as a pillow. Hirosue's defenceless face and warm weight on Matsuoka's lap made his feelings waver in a mixture of love and annoyance.

Hirosue was still asleep when they arrived in front of his apartment. When Matsuoka gave his shoulders a rough shake after paying the cab fare, he finally opened his eyes a crack. The bleary-eyed man took his wallet out of his bag, apparently intending to pay the fare.

"I've already got your payment, sir. Now, if you could please get out of the car," said the driver gruffly. Hirosue stumbled out. He tried to hand the money to Matsuoka, but Matsuoka staunchly refused to accept it.

"I don't care about the money. I want to talk to you, Mr. Hirosue." He glared at the man as they stood on the street, refusing to step down. Hirosue averted his gaze and lowered his face. Without another word, he began to walk towards his apartment. Matsuoka followed after him. Hirosue's drunkenness still lingered in his gait, which was slower than usual as he climbed the stairs.

Once they entered the apartment, Hirosue put his lips directly to the faucet in the kitchen and drank from it. He caught his breath, then proceeded further into the room. He took off his suit jacket, then seated himself on the floor, half leaning against the wall.

Matsuoka stood directly in front of the man and looked down at him. Hirosue had made it clear that he did not want Matsuoka around. That much was obvious. There was nothing he could do about that, but if the man did hate him, Matsuoka wanted to know why. He felt he could not be convinced otherwise.

"Tell me why."

Hirosue's head jerked and hung even lower.

"Tell me why it can't be me!"

Impatient with the man's stubborn silence, Matsuoka squatted down until his eyes were level with him and gave the man's shoulder a shake. The man's eyes remained lowered as he muttered in a bothersome way.

"You're a man."

Decisive words, spat from his lips. Matsuoka felt the blood rise to his head. He slammed his fist against the *tatami* mat. All of the feelings he had kept suppressed in the pit of his stomach burst out of his mouth at once.

"Damn right, I am! That's why I made sure with you so many times before I told you the truth! *You* said you would be fine with me whether I was an old person or a child. That's why I told you. I trusted your words."

Hirosue lifted his face and looked at Matsuoka with a murky gaze.

"But you lied to me." He said it as if that concluded everything—Matsuoka clenched his fists in helpless frustration.

"I apologized about lying!" he snapped. "Several times! Besides, you lied to me, too. You said you could still love me, but as soon as you found out I was a man, you changed."

The man cradled his head and clawed at his hair before shaking his head slowly.

"I didn't mean to lie. That time, I thought I could love you no matter who you were, no matter what kind of mistakes you'd made in the past. But... I never even imagined that you'd be a man."

Matsuoka placed a hand on his chest and inched towards Hirosue.

"Yoko Eto and Yosuke Matsuoka are both me. I'm serious about how I feel towards you, Mr. Hirosue, and that hasn't changed."

The man's gaze, which had been steadily fixed on Matsuoka, dropped away.

"No, you're wrong."

"I'm not. Yoko Eto is the fake one."

The man shook his head vigorously.

"You say she's fake, but to me Ms. Yoko is much more real. A beautiful, doll-like woman who has a gentle smile and can't talk—for me, she's reality."

The man lowered his gaze.

"I said I would love her no matter what kind of truth came to light. But ultimately, I can't love you the way I love her."

Matsuoka clenched his jaw. *You say you can't love me, but have you even tried to?* He was almost tempted to ask the scathing question.

"Even if you tell me you're the same inside, I still can't love you. But it wasn't just her appearance that I was attracted to, either. My honest feelings are that I can't fall in love with you as a man. I didn't mean to lie. I didn't think my feelings would change."

Matsuoka wished he could heap abuse upon the man, call him a liar. *I told you the truth because you said you would love me. I made sure over and over again because I didn't want this to happen.*

He knew that the heart was prone to change, that sparks were prone to die. He knew—but he had believed that things would be different with this man.

"So you're saying I'm no good because I'm a man."

"I'm sorry."

As he sat in front of the apologizing man, Matsuoka thought. This man had rejected him on the most fundamental level, his sex; no number of e-mails, phone calls, or dinners Matsuoka had with him yielded any promising results. What could he do to make this man come around?

From his past relationship experience, he knew that this pattern of events meant he was better off giving up. Their relationship had not started from zero; it had tumbled from plus to the minus end before it had even begun. It was going to be difficult to bring it into plus territory again.

In his mind, he knew this might be the end. But he did not want to give up. One of the reasons why he found it hard was because he and Yoko Eto were no different apart from appearance. He couldn't completely abandon the hope that the man might love him again if he could only get to know Matsuoka's personality. He wanted to secure a spot close to the man using any method he could, even if he had to cross some lines—at least until he could get the man to realize that he and Yoko Eto were the same.

Matsuoka steeled himself and grabbed the slumped man by the front of his shirt. Hirotsugu raised his head.

"Sleep with me."

The pair of eyes on him snapped wide open.

"Have sex with me once. You might think you can't do it with a man, but just give it a try. It might work out."

"—It probably won't."

"Don't say so without even trying. Try it with me, even as a joke. I won't be convinced until you do."

Matsuoka drew the resistant man closer and kissed him. As Yoko Eto, he had kissed these lips over and over again and was completely under the impression that he knew them. But now, they felt like the lips of someone he didn't know.

Even if Hirosue's whole body stiffened, rejecting Matsuoka's very presence, he continued to kiss the man forcefully. Frustrated at Hirosue's lack of enthusiasm, Matsuoka ran his hands through the man's unruly hair like he used to do as Yoko Eto.

The man twitched in response. His passive kisses finally began to harbour some will. Hirosue circled his arms around Matsuoka with his eyes closed. His hands crept along Matsuoka's back. Filled with joy at his decent response, Matsuoka clung to the man, swept up in the moment.

Between entwining their tongues in deep kisses, he felt Hirosue pull his shirt out of his slacks. This was where Matsuoka would usually shut out the man's intrusive right hand, but today, there was no need for that.

The man's fingers ran across his bare skin, hiking his shirt up as they touched the small buds on Matsuoka's chest. His fingers pinched them lightly, sending a spasm through Matsuoka's spine.

Hirosue's eyes were still closed as he lay Matsuoka down on the *tatami* mat. He blindly pulled up his shirt and buried his face in Matsuoka's bare chest.

"They're small..." the man murmured, but he still put his lips to them. Matsuoka felt a shiver down his back at the wet sensation lingering and sucking at his nipples. He rubbed his inner thighs together at the stirring in his crotch. The man sucked one nipple with intense concentration while he pinched the other nipple, pointed and hard with the stimulation, with his right hand.

"They're small, but... they're so cute, Ms. Yoko."

Matsuoka, who had been basking in the comfort of being caressed, was abruptly brought back to reality.

"N...o..." He pushed Hirosue's head away. "I'm not Yoko—"

In an unbelievable move, Hirosue pressed his left hand against Matsuoka's mouth. It was as if to say he did not want to hear Matsuoka's voice.

When Matsuoka fell silent, Hirosue's fingers moved away from his mouth and settled again on caressing him. Hirosue continued to lick both buds on his chest with such tenacity Matsuoka felt like they would melt away. The man then undid the button of Matsuoka's slacks and drew the zipper down. Matsuoka helped the man by lifting his hips a little when his pants were pulled down. Hirosue drew the pants down to knee-level, but did not try to take off Matsuoka's underwear.

It was Matsuoka's first time having sex with a man, but he was aroused at doing it with the man he loved. His arousal was clearly visible under his underwear. Impatient to have it touched directly, Matsuoka yanked the man closer on top of him, but was forcefully thrust away. As Matsuoka hesitated in confusion, Hirosue flipped him over on top of the *tatami* mat.

The man's body overlapped his from behind. Two hands roughly fondled his chest, and he felt biting kisses on his neck. He could feel Hirosue's hardened crotch pressed up against him.

He heard the clinking of his belt being taken off. As he lay on his stomach, he felt his underwear being pulled off, revealing his buttocks. He barely had time to feel embarrassment before he felt the man's hot member press against his entrance.

"W-Wait—"

The tip of the man's member forced its way in without even any fondling to loosen the unused spot. Matsuoka cried out in pain.

"Stop, it hurts—Mr. Hirosue, it hurts!" The hand was pressed against his mouth again. The

violent sex organ drilled deeper into him, and he felt the lower half of his body seize up. Even though he had told the man to stop, to his disbelief, Hirosue continued to manhandle him. The feeling, coupled with a type of pain Matsuoka had never experienced before, made him tremble.

He had been prepared for the penetration that came with these acts. He wouldn't have minded. But since men could not produce their own lubrication, Matsuoka knew they would need to prepare themselves accordingly. There were various kinds of foreplay through which he would gradually stretch and loosen himself. If it still hurt after that, Matsuoka was prepared to endure it. But he had never even imagined that he would be penetrated in such a one-sided and forceful way.

"It—It really—hurts..." he pleaded desperately in a muffled voice through the hand that gagged him. But none of it reached the man's ears. Tears welled up in his eyes at the violence that forced its way inside of him.

"Ms. Yoko, you're so tight..."

After being painfully penetrated to the base and thinking it could get no worse, now he was being called by Yoko's name. Matsuoka nearly went insane.

"No! I'm not Yoko—" His mouth was covered again by the man's palm.

"Why are you rejecting me? I thought you were going to give yourself to me. Come on, loosen up..."

There was no way he could after the man had ignored his pleas of pain and thrust into him this way. Knowing he would be silenced if he voiced his complaints, Matsuoka shook his head instead. He felt the thing inch out of him. He thought he would finally be freed from the pain—yet, it only partially exited him before fiercely slamming into him again.

"Aagh!" His spine trembled as his lower half chafed. It didn't matter if Matsuoka was crying from the pain; Hirosue ruthlessly continued his back-and-forth motion, and eventually ejaculated inside him. As for Matsuoka, the pain had made his penis flaccid partway through, and it did not resume its shape again. Hirosue did not even touch Matsuoka's genitals. He seemed to be too occupied in his own climax to care about the person he was inflicting pain upon.

A wet squelch sounded from the unlubricated spot. Matsuoka felt something dripping from his testicles. A sticky, red liquid formed a thread as it came off on his hand.

"Jus... stop... I'm bleeding. Please, I'm begging you..." His pleas went unheard, and his hips continued to be jerked back and forth. It wasn't until a while later that the man finally stopped moving.

Hirosue was still embracing Matsuoka from behind when he suddenly went still.

"...Get out..." Matsuoka implored to the violence inside him, but the man did not move. When he realized the man was sleeping, Matsuoka tried to extricate himself from underneath him, but even a slight movement sent a fierce pain through his lower regions, making him whimper each time. Once he finally crawled his way out from under the man, he felt the strength leave him, and he flopped on the floor on his stomach.

His lower half was numb, and he could barely feel anything. But when he shifted his body even a little, he was overcome with shooting pains. Granted, Matsuoka had been the one to invite Hirosue to have sex, but did not imagine Hirosue would be so insensitive about it.

Although they had had sex in form, there was no love in the act. Hirosue still searched for

Yoko Eto while knowing he was sleeping with Yosuke Matsuoka. He was conscious that he was doing it with a man. That was probably why he hadn't touched Matsuoka's genitals and had insisted on penetrating him from behind.

While he searched for his underwear on all fours, Matsuoka felt something drip down his crotch. He hastily grabbed a nearby tissue to stop the flow. A mixture of blood and semen spilled from his numb anus. Every time he thought it stopped, it trickled anew down his thighs, and it was humiliating to have to wipe it up each time.

The flow finally stopped eventually, and Matsuoka readjusted his clothes. He wanted to get home soon and take a shower. He looked at the clock. It was already past three in the morning.

Matsuoka approached the man who was asleep, stark naked, on his stomach. The sight of his peaceful sleeping face filled Matsuoka with the urge to punch him. He swung his right hand up high, but it fell back into his lap, powerless. Before he knew it, tears were streaming from his eyes, falling as droplets on the man's cheek. Matsuoka gently cradled the man's head of tousled hair and curled up over him.

Matsuoka stayed like that for a while, then got up to pull a blanket out of the closet to drape over the man. He set the man's alarm clock to seven in the morning. 'I left your key in the mailbox,' he wrote in a note, which he left on top of the *kotatsu* before leaving the apartment and locking the door.

Although it was already April, it was still cold at night. He shivered under his inadequate thin coat, and the mere movement from walking jarred his lower half painfully. He felt horrible whether he was sitting or standing; he felt helpless. Not many taxis were running on the main road at this unusual hour, and it took Matsuoka twenty minutes to catch one. When a taxi finally came, he climbed into it and collapsed across the back seat. He passed out into a deep sleep until he arrived at his apartment.

Once Matsuoka got home, he immediately lay down in bed. His body felt unbearably heavy. He was tired, but his mind was filled with too many thoughts to sleep. However, he still got up at seven and took a shower. Although he was able to wash away the dirt on his body, he wasn't able to get rid of the heavy feeling in his lower half.

Matsuoka showed up for work at fifteen minutes past eight, as usual. Fortunately for him, since his position took him out of the office, he lay down to rest on park benches between his sales visits. He began to feel strangely hot in the afternoon, and he felt like he was getting a fever. He only continued to work because he felt like sitting still would bring unwanted thoughts into his head, which he wanted to avoid.

By the time his work ended at six in the evening, Matsuoka was so completely worn out he could not even muster a conversational smile. As soon as he got home, he collapsed into bed and slept until he heard the doorbell ring. He ignored it at first, figuring it was a newspaper salesperson.

He heard his ringtone go off as a new e-mail arrived. It was from Hirose. Matsuoka bolted upright.

'Where are you right now? I'm in front of your apartment, Mr. Matsuoka. I would like to apologize to you. Will you see me?'

His lower half ached from the sudden movement, but he didn't mind. He got as far as the door, then thought hard. He was filled with anticipation. Despite the cruel ordeal he had been put through, he still wanted to see the man's face. Matsuoka thought about all of it objectively—about everything

leading up to now, and about what was to come.

After ten minutes of thinking, he opened the door. Hirosue flinched in surprise from where he was leaning against the concrete barrier across.

"I'm sorry for yesterday." The man bowed his head deeply.

"Can you come in? I don't want to talk about this outside."

Hirosue did as he was told and stepped through the entrance. He did not take off his shoes. Matsuoka also had no intentions of letting him in any further.

"To tell you the truth," Hirosue began, "I don't remember clearly about everything that happened yesterday. But I do know that what I did to you can't be excused by the fact that I was drunk. I'm really sorry."

"You don't have to apologize." Matsuoka took a short breath and folded his arms. "I started it. We're both adults, and it was consensual. There's nothing for you to feel bad about, is there?"

"But..."

"Are you worried about what'll happen from now on?"

The man's head bobbed stiffly.

"I don't plan on e-mailing you or calling you ever again, Mr. Hirosue. I think yesterday gave me a very good idea of how you feel about me."

The man silently stared at the ground.

"I hope you won't mind if I just end it right here."

Hirosue slowly raised his head. Matsuoka did not miss the look of relief cross the man's face at his words. As if to prove his point, the man's answer was free of hesitation.

"Alright," he said promptly.

"I'm over it completely, now, to tell you the truth. Not to say it like a shot in bed was all I was looking for, but..."

There was no answer from Hirosue, but his eyes seemed somewhat cold as they looked at Matsuoka.

"You can go home now," Matsuoka said.

At his encouragement, Hirosue opened the front door. He stepped halfway outside, then abruptly turned around like he had remembered something.

"By the way, were you alright?"

Matsuoka was caught off-guard.

"The *tatami* was... um... stained, so..."

He had wiped the conspicuous spots before he went home, but some stains had not come off.

"I'm fine."

"Okay," the man murmured, then inclined his head in a distant manner before closing the door. After the lingering sound of the closing door and the footsteps faded away, Matsuoka sank to the floor.

He had wiped the stained floor so Hirosue wouldn't feel guilty. Even if there had been a blood stain, he was sure it wasn't very big. He was already aware that the man's concern for his body was nothing more than an afterthought, but he still felt hopeless all the same.

He asked himself what was so attractive about such an insensitive and indecisive man. But he

had already fallen in love with him, and there was nothing he could do about that.

Hirosue shared none of his feelings. Matsuoka had nothing to capture the man with; in fact, to Hirosue, he was simply a nuisance. There was no way he could say he wanted to continue their relationship.

Matsuoka knew well that he would only cause trouble for Hirosue by telling him he loved him. That was why he ended it, pretending his feelings had fizzled. By openly acting like he was over his attachment, he had hoped it would make it emotionally easier for Hirosue.

He had done so many things out of consideration for the man, but the man he loved had given him no consideration in return. He had left Matsuoka with nothing but hurtful words and a hurtful attitude.

Matsuoka dragged himself back to his room. Despite all the unsympathetic treatment he had been subjected to, Matsuoka still found himself loving the man. How wretched he was, he thought. How pathetic.

Matsuoka heartily regretted sleeping with Hirosue. But as time went by, he was able to convince himself that it was better that things had ended this way. There was no room for lingering attachments in the way it had ended; the sex couldn't be worse, and he was beyond unimpressed by the man's insensitive attitude.

Now that Matsuoka thought about it rationally, there was clearly something wrong with him, too. He had continued to meet up with the man dressed as a woman, and the more the man wooed him, the more carried away he had become. Even though Hirosue was completely under the impression that he was a woman, Matsuoka had still believed that their romance would continue even after he divulged that he was a man. Matsuoka was mature enough to know the difference between someone's outwardly attitude and his actual feelings. It didn't take much thinking to see that such a relationship was bound to end badly.

Sometimes everything seemed to go wrong, as if it were tumbling down a slope, just like how there were ups and downs in how well things went at work. But most things passed; he just had to wait it out. Eventually, he would no longer be able to recall what happened, or even what had made it a bad ordeal. *This must be in the same category*, Matsuoka thought. *I just have to wait for time to solve everything.*

A little past mid-April, a week after he had parted ways with Hirosue, Matsuoka discarded all of his women's clothes, shoes, and wig. Altogether, it amounted to two large garbage bags. Amidst a mixture of surprise and futility, Matsuoka somehow found it funny. By obliterating every shred and sign of his past from his apartment, he pressed his internal reset button to return to his normal life.

Starting that day, Matsuoka began to throw himself into his work. He made almost twice as many sales visits as his co-workers, and his performance improved significantly. He dashed about outside from morning to late at night. Matsuoka's co-workers teased him for suddenly transforming into a man who dedicated every drop of blood to his work. "You're working awfully hard. Are you saving up for something? Getting married, by any chance?" they joked. Matsuoka glossed it over with a vague smile.

He knew it wasn't going to be that easy to get over Hirose. But he wished he could, and he wished he could get over him quickly. He immersed himself in work in order to distract himself, but had no success in achieving that goal. Even if he worked himself to the bone and his body felt as heavy and limp as mud, one little slip of his mind was enough to make him remember. It usually came before he went to sleep, and once he fell into the rut of self-loathing, the night became an unbearably endless one.

Golden Week came and went; the rainy season arrived; the newscasters on television celebrated its passing, and the dizzying rays of the sun glared down upon them. But still, things did not change.

One thing that did pay off was his work performance. Matsuoka placed first in his department for the most sales contracts won for two months in a row. His boss complimented him, and Matsuoka himself was glad for it, but he could not give himself wholly to his happiness. Even while chatting or laughing with his co-workers, he was always aware of the void in his feelings. The draft always lowered his emotional temperature as it whistled through the hole in his heart.

One day past mid-July, Hayama, an administrative staff for the sales department, returned from her temporary assignment at Koishikawa Laboratory. Headquarters had received the request from Koishikawa Laboratory at the end of April. Two workers had resigned soon after starting work, and Koishikawa was short-staffed. They asked for one administrative staff to fill in for two months until a worker returned from maternity leave.

Koishikawa asked for an administrator who was not in their first year of work—someone who could be put to work right away. As a result, headquarters had sent Hayama, an experienced administrator and in Matsuoka's cohort.

"It's so far," Hayama had complained freely before being transferred, "and I know nothing about the place. I feel like once they send me over there, I'm never going to be able to come back." Hearing about Koishikawa reminded Matsuoka of Hirose, and made his spirits sink instantly.

"Don't worry, two months will pass by in a flash," Matsuoka consoled her nonetheless, careful not to let his unhappiness show.

That day, Matsuoka was out of the office from morning to afternoon on sales visits. He had planned to pay visits to a few more of his regular clients, but the heat was so unbearable that he wrapped up partway and returned to the office. In the cool, air-conditioned room, he immersed himself in the mountain of paperwork that he had amassed. Suddenly, he heard a familiar voice that he had not heard in a while.

"Matsuoka," said the voice behind him.

Matsuoka turned around to see a smiling Hayama standing there. It had been almost two months since he last saw her.

"Oh, you're back."

"Yup. You're stuck with me again."

Her appearance had changed a little. Before, her makeup had been a little more dynamic; now, it was softer.

"What's up with that?" Hayama pointed at Matsuoka's chin.

"Looks good, doesn't it? I've always wanted to try it out." Matsuoka stroked the short stubble

on his chin.

"Well, it does suit you, but..." Hayama trailed off in an unsatisfied way.

"I cropped my hair short, too. I want to go for a more rugged look for the summer. So far I'm getting mixed reactions from clients, but it does make a good topic for conversation."

"I think I like how you looked before," Hayama murmured in slight disappointment. "You're okay with coffee for three o'clock break, right?" she then asked, apparently in charge of preparing the beverages that day.

"Yeah," Matsuoka answered offhandedly before remembering that he had been avoiding coffee lately because his stomach wasn't doing well. Hayama was already nowhere to be seen on the floor. Matsuoka went after her to the kitchenette at the end of the hallway. Hayama was pouring hot water from the dispenser into a teapot. Apparently hearing his footsteps, she turned around before Matsuoka called out to her.

"What's wrong?"

"I'll pass on the coffee. Can you make it tea instead?"

"Sure thing," Hayama said, then peered into Matsuoka's face. "You know, you don't look very well."

"Huh? Really?" Matsuoka reflexively touched his cheek.

"I didn't notice at first because I was too distracted by your goatee, but you've lost weight haven't you? I heard about how you got the highest number of new contracts for May and June. Are you sure you're not working too much?"

Matsuoka smiled vaguely like he had been doing at everyone else so far.

"There are rumours going around with the girls, you know," Hayama continued. "They think you must be getting married, seeing the way you're working these days. There must be something you're saving up for."

Matsuoka hunched his shoulders. "If only I had someone to get married to. I'm just really into my job right now. I enjoy getting these contracts."

Hayama paused her pouring for a moment and appeared to think a little. "Then, you're not going out with anyone right now?"

"Nope. I don't know what these girls are thinking, letting a stud like me stay single."

Hayama laughed out loud. "There are a lot of girls in administration who have a crush on you, you know. But they tell me they never get a chance to talk to you because you always go away on your sales rounds and never come back."

Matsuoka could tell that some girls had feelings towards him; he was pretty sensitive to that kind of vibe. If a girl approached him who seemed to have that kind of intent, he always wormed his way out of it. He couldn't bring himself to date someone just yet.

"Actually, I know a really nice girl. She's my friend."

Matsuoka had been careful to avoid turning the conversation to relationships, but he was unprepared for this ambush. He swore inwardly.

"She's three years younger than me and works at an online shopping company. She's cute and has a really nice personality, but she's super shy. She says she's never even dated before." Hayama was looking at him with an earnest gaze.

"How do you feel about meeting up with her, Matsuoka?"

It would be only natural for him to jump at the chance, considering how he had been acting up until now. That made it all the more difficult to come up with a solid excuse to refuse. Matsuoka cast his thoughts around desperately.

"She and I are really close, so I didn't want to introduce her to just anyone. But I've always thought you'd be a good guy for her, Matsuoka."

"That's a lot of pressure," Matsuoka joked. "Sure, I'm friendly, but I can be pretty careless. And..." Matsuoka went on to voice all the shortcomings he could think of, but Hayama was decisive in her words.

"Matsuoka, you're a nice guy. You might say stuff like that, but deep down, you're sincere."

When Matsuoka was silent, Hayama hastily tacked on some words.

"Oh, but if you don't want to, I won't force you. It's all just me thinking you two would be good together. I haven't told her anything."

The air between them was making it hard for him to say no.

"Why don't you just try meeting her? She might be reluctant to jump right into dating, too, so we can go out to eat a couple of times with a group of friends."

As long as we're not alone together. The idea of a compromise flitted across his heart. It was hard to say no right here, and if he agreed to meet her just once, he'd be fulfilling his obligation. He could always back out of it later, claiming that they just didn't hit it off.

"Well, since you've suggested it, why not? I'll meet up with her," he murmured. Hayama's face lit up with joy.

"Really?"

"Yeah. Ask your friend for her schedule. Let me know once you find out a date that's good. I'll make sure I don't work overtime that day."

Since they had reached a break in their conversation, Matsuoka left the kitchenette and returned to his desk. In an unexpected turn of events, he was now going to be introduced to a girl. His spirits sank at the result he had bestowed upon himself, but the more he thought about it, the more he began to think that it was nothing to be so serious about.

It had been a while since he had shared a meal with someone. No one had invited him to, and he had not been in the mood to himself.

He had focused solely on working hard. He had expected the extra strain he placed upon himself to pay off by bringing oblivion even a second sooner. But he was not getting the results he had hoped for.

Maybe he had no choice but to wait for the memory to fade gradually as it took its natural course. Perhaps being introduced to a girl was one part of that. Meeting and talking to someone completely new was, perhaps, not enough to make him move on, but at least a chance for a change of scene.

Three days ago, Hayama had told him she wanted to introduce him to a girl. Apparently she had gotten in touch with the friend immediately afterwards, for the next day, she got back to him with

plans for dinner—Friday night, at seven o'clock.

On the day of, Matsuoka finished all of his work at six-thirty, and left the office with Hayama. Dusk was falling around them. The absence of the sun made the heat a little more bearable, but the humidity still made him want to claw at his throat. Matsuoka was itching to knock back a cold one.

Their meeting spot was an Italian restaurant one station away from the office. Red bricks made for a stylish interior decor and it was reminiscent of a garden. Many of the guests were groups of young women or couples. Although it was crowded inside, they were immediately shown to a four-seat table since Hayama had a reservation.

Hayama glanced around. "I don't think she's here yet," she said, then exhaled shortly. When her eyes met with Matsuoka's, she pointed to the small, oval-shaped glasses he was wearing.

"What's with those?"

"They're fake," Matsuoka answered. "I needed something to balance my face with the stubble." He lifted his glasses a little. "Don't I look better with them?"

"Hmmm," Hayama said, wrinkling her brow. "You've got a pretty face, so you look good in anything. But that doesn't seem like your style."

"Am I trying too hard?" Matsuoka joked. Hayama laughed out loud in response. While they were talking, a waiter in black brought a long-haired girl to their table.

"A member of your party is here," he announced. The girl wore a casual outfit of a simple black jersey shirt with jeans, and had a canvas bag slung over her right shoulder. If she had chosen to wear this, aware that she was going to meet with a man, she was either unconcerned with appearances, or was simply not interested in fashion.

"I came straight from work, so I didn't have time to change. I'm sorry."

Matsuoka glanced at her face, but not obviously enough to make her feel awkward. The girl did not even make eye contact with Matsuoka as she continued talking to Hayama.

"Don't worry about it," Hayama said. "Let me introduce you two. This here across from me is Yosuke Matsuoka, who's a salesman in the same department as me."

When the girl's gaze finally turned on him, Matsuoka flashed her a welcoming smile he usually reserved for his best clients.

"Hi. I'm Matsuoka."

The girl kept her eyes lowered and did not look at Matsuoka as she ducked her head slightly.

"This is Mako Fujimoto. She was an underclassman of mine at university."

"...Hello." Her voice trembled as she finally lifted her doe-eyed gaze to meet his. She had a cute face, but her cheeks were oddly stiff from nervousness. *This might be pretty tough if she can't even give a friendly smile*, Matsuoka thought inwardly. Fujimoto made to sit down beside Hayama, but was gently reprimanded.

"Your spot's on the other side, Mako," said Hayama, and Fujimoto sat down beside Matsuoka.

Just then, Hayama's cell phone rang, and she stood up. "Excuse me for a bit," she said as she answered it. As soon as they were alone together, the tension became palpable as it radiated from Fujimoto's body.

"Are you nervous, by any chance?" Matsuoka said to her. She kept her eyes ahead as she shook her head. Matsuoka had never interacted with a girl who was so unused to the opposite sex. Her

attempt to put on a brave face was strangely pitiful to watch, and drew Matsuoka's interest.

"You know, I just went through a breakup." He caught the gaze that moved towards him. Matsuoka grinned sheepishly. "Not that that means anything. But don't worry about me and just enjoy yourself. When I see people looking happy and having a good time, it lifts my mood, too."

He almost felt sucked in by her large eyes as they watched him inquisitively. Gradually, Matsuoka was overcome with an indescribable awkwardness. He averted his gaze so as not to be unnatural.

"Hayama's taking pretty long, isn't she?" he said, diverting her attention. "Why don't we start choosing drinks? What do you like?"

Hayama came back just as they opened the menus.

"Let's go ahead and get started," she said, taking a seat. Even after they finished giving orders, Hayama constantly checked the restaurant entrance in a restless manner.

"Who else is coming?" Matsuoka asked. Hayama continued to glance at the entrance.

"You see..." she began, then made a small exclamation. Her face instantly lit up in a smile. "There he is."

When Matsuoka saw the man being led over by the waiter, his breath caught in astonishment. His eyes forgot to blink as they fixed upon him.

"Hirosue, over here." Hayama raised her hand and called the man over. Why was Hirosue here? Why? Why? Question marks ran through his head. The man's approaching figure made Matsuoka's heart hammer painfully. His clenched fists on the table began to tremble, and he almost hoped that the man had come to see him, having clearly forgotten about the horrible way they had ended.

Hirosue threw a glance at Matsuoka, but only tipped his head slightly in an aloof manner.

"I'm sorry I'm late. The traffic was really bad."

"You were busy with work, weren't you? I'm sorry for inviting you out on such short notice. Have a seat."

Hirosue sat beside Hayama and put his work bag down at his feet.

"Mako, I don't think you've met him before. This is Motofumi Hirosue. He was very good to me when I was temporarily transferred to Koishikawa Lab."

"Hi," Hirosue smiled at her after being introduced by Hayama.

"And she's Mako Fujimoto. She used to be my underclassman at university. Beside her is Yosuke Matsuoka, who works in Sales at the same company as me."

"Huh?" Hirosue's eyes widened as his voice cracked.

"Do you know Matsuoka?"

"Oh... yeah... um, actually, well..."

Hayama tilted her head at his unclear answer. Hirosue stopped even looking in his direction. It was more than obvious that he was trying to avoid Matsuoka's eyes. Matsuoka could almost see the words "oh no" written on the man's bowed forehead. He almost gave a derisive laugh.

"Hi. It's been a while, hasn't it?" Matsuoka said slowly, enunciating each word clearly as he stared the man down. Hirosue had not even realized that he was Yosuke Matsuoka until he was introduced by Hayama. There was no way he could think that Hirosue had come to see him now. No

way at all.

"Mr. Hirosue used to be in General Affairs at headquarters. I'm friends with someone else in his department, and that's how I met Mr. Hirosue. You took down a message for him once, Hayama, remember?"

"Did I?" Hayama cocked her head. Matsuoka neurotically rubbed the tips of his fingernails together under the table and feigned nonchalance as he asked a question.

"Hayama, are you guys dating, by any chance?"

Hayama blushed sheepishly at Matsuoka's question.

"Well, I guess you can say we are."

Everything went dark before his eyes. He knew it wasn't possible, but it felt like all colour had vanished from his surroundings.

"Oh, I see." His murmur died out at the end. In front of him, Hayama put her hand on the shoulder of the man sitting beside her. Hirosue hastily raised his head and looked at Matsuoka for a split instant before diverting his gaze again.

Their beer was brought shortly afterwards, and the four of them gave a toast. Matsuoka whipped all the muscles in his face to action so he could look glad as he clinked glasses and said "cheers". He only took one gulp before putting his glass down. He couldn't control the shaking in his right hand, and he felt like he wouldn't be able to hold his glass without spilling his drink.

The girls picked which dishes to order. Every time Matsuoka was asked "How's this?" he answered, "Sure, why not?" without really thinking. Once they finished giving orders, Hayama began talking with Fujimoto. Hirosue was not a good talker; even if a topic was tossed at him, he was unable to take it and run with it for long. Matsuoka didn't feel like talking, so he spoke in a way that made the conversation die out. The girls soon began an animated conversation over clothes, leaving the two unsociable men out of the loop. Matsuoka gazed at the hands of the man across from him, who clenched and unclenched his fingers around his empty beer glass with his head down, in a lost sort of way.

Matsuoka was quite truthfully relieved when the food was brought. He had an excuse not to talk if he pretended to be busy with eating. He played along with the rest of the table as they raised their voices in awe at the colourful arrangement of the dishes, saying, "Wow, that looks delicious". He took some food on his plate, but all he did was push it around with his fork. He barely ate any.

"Matsuoka." He looked up hastily at Hayama when his name was called.

"Are you alright? You're not eating much."

"I'm fine. I'm just nervous because there's a cute girl beside me," Matsuoka joked lightheartedly. "Hey, this looks good," he said as he grabbed a marinated dish he did not even feel like eating. "So," he said, "this restaurant has a really good ambiance. How did you find out about it?"

"One of my juniors at the office told me she knew a good restaurant."

"Saito, isn't it?"

Hayama widened her eyes in surprise. "How did you know, Matsuoka?"

"She looks like she'd be fixated on anything to do with food."

"You're *horrible*," Hayama said, but she was laughing. "Saito is one of my juniors. She's a little on the chubby side. She's a foodie, and she knows a lot about restaurants."

Hayama explained their conversation thoroughly to Hirosue, who had no clue about their social circle. Matsuoka felt an inexplicable mounting frustration just watching the two sitting and talking beside each other. Feeling it surge up at once, he almost got out of his seat. Just then, Fujimoto asked Hayama a question.

"How long have you two been dating for?"

His temper, which had been boiling over until then, instantly receded as he was brought back to reality by her voice.

"About a month, I think."

A month. A month ago, he had been clawing at contracts left and right like a madman. All the while he had been struggling to forget, Hirosue had went and gotten a new girlfriend.

"After I got transferred, I was having a really hard time because I couldn't get used to the work. Hirosue was the one who cheered me up. That's when I started taking a liking to him, and... right?"

Hayama looked up at Hirosue, looking for his assent.

"Yeah," Hirosue said quietly.

"Don't mind him. He's not very talkative."

Matsuoka stood up, his chair screeching more loudly than he had expected. Three pairs of eyes turned towards him.

"I'm just going to run to the bathroom."

He left his seat and went into the restroom at the back of the restaurant. He shut himself into a stall, locked it from the inside, then slid into a squatting position with his back to the wall.

He wanted to cry, but no tears came. He felt like he was in a pitch-black hole. *That bastard*, he muttered inwardly to himself. Hirosue was only kind on the outside; in reality, he was weak, cold-hearted. But Matsuoka was stuck here, a pathetic man, because he wasn't able to bring himself to hate him.

Five minutes. Ten. Matsuoka stayed frozen in place before slowly lurching to his feet. He could say he drank too much, or ate too much—it didn't matter what reason. He was going home. He didn't want to sit there any longer.

When he emerged from the stall, there was someone standing in front of the mirror. When he realized it was the very man he had been wishing he could hate just seconds ago, Matsuoka's breath caught in his throat. Hirosue was looking this way, but all he did was look. He said nothing. After a long, suffocating silence, the man's lips finally moved.

"I thought you were a stranger."

Was he talking about his first impression of Matsuoka when he got to the restaurant? Matsuoka smiled with just his lips. He lightly pushed his non-prescription glasses up his nose.

"I didn't know you and Ms. Hayama knew each other," Hirosue said quietly. Matsuoka looked down and closed his eyes. He clenched his jaw before raising his head. He prayed that all expression had vanished from his face when he did.

"You know I'm in Sales at headquarters, and you know Hayama was sent from the same department to Koishikawa. Didn't it even cross your mind that we might know each other?"

"We didn't talk much about headquarters..."

Matsuoka sniffed derisively at his excuse. "Sure, maybe you weren't interested in what went

on at headquarters, but would it hurt to be a little cautious to avoid these situations?"

The man's head gradually dipped lower.

"Even though we don't have anything between us anymore, it's not very pleasant to run into each other like this, is it?"

"Is that—"

Matsuoka's sigh shook as it escaped his lips. He took a deep breath.

"Try to think a little, will you?" he spat. Just as he was on his way out, a voice chased after him.

"Is it my fault?" it said.

Matsuoka stopped.

"Is it all my fault that we ran into each other because I didn't know who her friends were?"

Today, I was invited out of the blue because she said she was drinking with a co-worker and wanted me to come. She said 'co-worker', so I was under the impression that it was a girl." A hint of anger flickered in his demeanour. His tone was harsh. If he lost his temper here, this would probably end in a very unpleasant argument.

"I know where you're coming from, but it's still true that you had more information than me," Matsuoka said firmly. "I had no idea that Hayama was dating, or that it was you, until you two sat down right in front of me."

Matsuoka stuck his right hand into his hair and raked it in frustration.

"Whatever. It doesn't matter anymore. It's only for this evening. We've been through a lot, but let's both start over with clean slates. I got introduced to Ms. Fujimoto beside me, anyway. Oh, and as for Hayama, you made a good choice. She's considerate and nice."

He felt like he had been able to carry the conversation well—as if he was only feeling awkward because he had been caught by surprise with no prior knowledge. Not because he was still attached to Hirosue.

"You're pretty unfeeling."

Matsuoka almost doubted his ears. The man's utterance was even more brittle as it lodged itself in Matsuoka's chest. In no way did he feel he deserved to hear that from Hirosue, who had went and gotten himself a girlfriend while Matsuoka was struggling to forget him.

"On the contrary," Matsuoka retorted, "I think someone might have a problem if it takes him forever to get over it. Or, what, are you saying I still have to be in love with you, Mr. Hirosue?"

He wondered if the man would say "yes", even as a lie, but he remained silent. Matsuoka exited the restroom, leaving the clammed-up man inside.

"W-Wait!"

The man grabbed his arm in the narrow corridor leading to the restaurant floor. The strength, heat, and the physical contact sent a jolt of agitation through Matsuoka.

"Please don't tell her—about what happened before."

Matsuoka's excited, heated feelings died at once as he realized that Hirosue had come after him solely to say those words.

"Why the hell would I?" he snarled, shaking the man off before returning to his seat.

"You took long. Did you run into Hirosue?"

He ignored Hayama, but was soon overcome with guilt, and replied to her.

"We passed each other in the hallway." He tacked on a smile as if to make up for the awkwardness he felt from almost ignoring her. Hayama herself did not seem to notice Matsuoka's delayed answer or the subtle change of his emotions.

She doesn't know anything, he thought as he stared intently at Hayama's face while she talked animatedly with Fujimoto. *I should just tell her everything*. Ugly emotions circled in the pit of his stomach. How would Hayama react? Would she feel contempt towards Hirosue for sleeping with a man, even though it was under the influence of alcohol? Or would she scorn Matsuoka for having serious romantic feelings for another man?

"Is something on my face?" Hayama tilted her head.

"No," Matsuoka said, shifting his gaze away. He didn't even want to imagine what kind of look he had been giving Hayama. Hatred, jealousy—he didn't want to feel them, but they still bubbled up inside his chest.

He heard the chair across from him screech. Hirosue was back. His heart ached just watching the two sitting side-by-side. The perfect picture of the chosen one and the one who wasn't chosen. *I only have to deal with this once. As long as I can get through today*—he told himself. In a desperate effort to divert his attention away from the reality before him, he spoke to Fujimoto.

"So, what do you do on your days off, Ms. Fujimoto?"

Her shoulders jerked in surprise. "Cleaning and going shopping..." Fujimoto said in a small voice.

"Don't you go out for fun?"

"Not really."

Hayama butted into their conversation, frustrated, perhaps, by Fujimoto's passive attitude.

"You like aquariums, right? Remember how you were saying that dolphins are cute?"

"Oh, really?" Matsuoka said. "Want to go together sometime?"

Fujimoto suddenly fell silent. Matsuoka didn't care whether it was "yes" or "no". He just wanted an answer. Silence was the hardest to deal with, because that was all it took to kill the mood. Matsuoka smiled wryly, wondering how he would mop up this mess of a conversation.

"Oh, I'm not forcing you or anything, though," he said, trying to put it behind them. Fujimoto looked up at him anxiously.

"You mean together... alone?"

Hayama overheard her and intervened. "Let's go with the four of us, then. How about that?" she suggested to the group. Matsuoka inwardly froze in dread at the words "four of us".

"Yeah, but—" He threw a glance at Hirosue, hoping he would get the message that he wanted the man to stop Hayama. But the man only averted his gaze, furrowing his brow in a difficult expression. He showed no signs of backing him up.

"But wouldn't it be hard to find a day that works for all four of us?" Matsuoka protested.

"Everyone has Saturdays and Sundays off, don't we?" Hayama said promptly. "And you're okay with it if it's with the four of us, right?"

Fujimoto nodded as if to yield to Hayama's assertive suggestion. Now it was decided that the four of them would go together, but afterwards their conversation topic changed, and in the end they did not decide on a specific date.

Several times, Matsuoka tried to get up to say he was going home, but thought against it. *It would probably be rude towards Fujimoto if I left now. All I have to do is endure this for a little bit longer.* Time wore on as he brooded, and soon it was time to leave the restaurant.

Fujimoto was taking a train in the opposite direction from everyone else, so they walked her to the subway station. After she disappeared from view, Hayama turned to Matsuoka, put her palms together, and apologized.

"I'm sorry," she said. "She was kind of antisocial, wasn't she? She has a nice personality, but..."

"I don't mind," Matsuoka murmured as he shrugged. "I don't have a problem with those types, anyway."

The street in front of the station was busy with people, even at this time of night. He looked at his watch and saw that it was past nine.

"I better get—" he said as he looked up to see Hayama whispering something to Hirose. Her slender fingers grasped the cuff of Hirose's suit sleeve.

"I'm going home."

"What?" Hayama exclaimed in surprise. "It's still so early. Let's go into another place."

"I don't want to disturb you guys. Thanks for today. See you Monday, then." Matsuoka gave a casual wave of his right hand before turning his back on the two. He walked at a pace that wasn't too quick to be obvious, and entered the train platform of the line he usually rode.

The train had just left, and the platform was deserted. He had a little time until the next train came, so he sat down on the bench. His head, which had been facing forward, gradually drooped, and soon he was looking at the tips of his shoes.

I shouldn't have agreed to Hayama's invitation. He had regretted it about a million times already.

He remembered the fingertips that grasped Hirose's jacket sleeve before they parted. Five months ago, he had been in that position. He was supposed to be the one to touch the man's cheek, circle his arms around his neck, and wait for the clumsy man to embrace him back tightly.

He wondered if he would still have been in that position if he had not revealed that he was a man. But it wasn't something he could hide forever, and he felt like the longer he tricked the man, the deeper the wound it would have left on both of them.

Matsuoka wondered how much Hayama loved Hirose. No matter how much she did, he was confident he loved him just as much, if not more. Although he could assert all he wanted that he loved the man more, that his feelings were more genuine, Hirose was the one who could choose. And Matsuoka had not been good enough.

Then, what about Hirose himself? Did he love Hayama more than he did Yoko Eto? Matsuoka had a feeling he didn't, but he probably just hoped it was that way.

He felt something roil in the pit of his stomach, and his tear ducts stung. He had accepted that he had not been chosen, that he had been rejected. But why did he have to find out about his new lover, as well, as if to rub salt in the wound?

Matsuoka took off his glasses, which were wet with tears, and covered his face with his hands. He always dreaded looking at his face in the mirror in the morning. No matter what he did, he kept seeing remnants of Yoko Eto in his reflection. That was why he had cropped his hair, grown out his goatee, and put on glasses. He changed his look as much as he could so he wouldn't be reminded of

Yoko Eto—and of Hirosue.

Matsuoka laughed through his tears. In a sense, he could say he had succeeded. Upon seeing him for the first time in three months, the man had not even realized it was him.

The train pulled into the station, and left the echoes of its roar as it grew smaller into the distance. As Matsuoka missed one train after the next, the tears on his cheeks gradually dried. But even then, it was a long while later that he was finally able to get up from the bench.

After eating out that evening with the group, Matsuoka avoided associating with Hayama if he could help it. Now that he knew she was dating Hirosue, he could no longer see her as a good friend like he used to. Just hearing her voice or seeing her smiling face made him feel downtrodden. Being faced with his own pathetic jealousy took a harder toll on him than he had imagined.

Matsuoka appeared at the office less often than he did before. Oftentimes, he only showed up at the office to attend the morning meeting, and did not return to the office again for the rest of the day. He got a tan from walking around outside all day. Since he sweated in his suit, he sent it out for dry cleaning so many times that he soon ruined a pair of slacks.

On the last day of July, Matsuoka got a call from his boss on his cell phone while he was having a late lunch in a fast food restaurant, which was crowded with middle-school and high-school students out of their uniforms. His boss said he had something to discuss with him and told Matsuoka to return once to the office before he clocked out. Matsuoka scarfed down his combo meal and hurried through his scheduled afternoon visits to regular clients.

At four in the evening, he returned to the office, a little worn out from too much dashing about. He was immediately summoned by his boss. He seemed to be in a good mood, so Matsuoka figured it was probably not bad news. True to his guess, it was a proposal for a promotion. Matsuoka was told that he had been recognized for his performance in the past few months and the time leading up to that. At today's meeting, it was decided that he would be promoted to general chief of the sales department. Since the formal announcement was going to be made next week, Matsuoka was told to keep quiet until then.

Truthfully, he was happy to be recognized for his efforts—especially so, since he had been feeling a little despondent these past few days.

"Hey," a voice greeted him just as Matsuoka returned to his desk and sat down. His whole body bristled with tension. He turned around and made a conscious effort to smile.

"Hey," he answered.

"What were you and the subsection manager talking about?"

"It's a secret," Matsuoka whispered as he hunched his shoulders.

"Ooh, suspicious," Hayama giggled. "Oh yeah, Matsuoka, are you free next Wednesday evening?"

Their talk about going out as a group flashed across his mind. "Why?" he asked.

"For Mr. Ishii's farewell party. You know he's going to be transferred to the new sales office that's just been established. I wondered if you would be able to go. I'm in charge of putting the party together."

"Right," Matsuoka murmured as he took his planner out of the briefcase he used for sales rounds. "I think I can go. I don't have any plans for entertaining clients, and I'm not that busy right now anyway."

"Great," Hayama said as she marked the memo she was holding. She craned her neck to peer at Matsuoka's planner while she was at it. "Your schedule is pretty crammed, isn't it?"

"Well, yeah. I'm a popular guy." He thought Hayama would laugh his joke off, but she only responded with "mm-hmm," making Matsuoka feel somewhat awkward.

"I see you don't have any plans on Saturday and Sunday."

"Come on, I'd keel over if I worked on my days off, too," Matsuoka said with a wry smile. Hayama extended a finger at the coming Saturday on his planner.

"Then, what do you say to going to the aquarium on this day with the same group we went out for dinner with?"

The conversation took an unexpected turn. Matsuoka couldn't think of an excuse to turn her down.

"Umm, well, that day isn't very..." Matsuoka said vaguely, making Hayama peer into his face.

"Not good? But you don't have plans, right?"

"Well, yeah, but..."

Hayama made a dubious face, sensing Matsuoka's lack of enthusiasm.

"I talked to Mako the other day. She seems to be interested in you. She felt really down about herself because she wasn't very good at keeping up a conversation with you. I won't force you if you're not interested, but I'm wondering if you'll give her another chance."

Fujimoto had been unsociable, but he hadn't found her unpleasant. But honestly speaking, he didn't feel strongly enough to actively keep in touch with her, either. Hayama did not know that he used to love Hirose, and Matsuoka knew that; however, the way she recommended her friend to him invited black doubts into his heart that perhaps she was trying to pair him off with someone soon to get rid of him.

He raked his hair aggressively. He hated being like this. He hated himself for it.

"I don't mind meeting with Ms. Fujimoto again, but I'd rather it be just the two of us next time."

Hirose's figure crossed his mind hazily.

"Really? You'll meet her if it's just you two?"

"Yeah," Matsuoka answered. Hayama let out a sigh of relief.

"I'll tell Mako that you said you wanted to see her alone. Whatever you do, keep this Saturday open, Matsuoka, you hear?"

Hayama pressed her point over and over with Matsuoka to keep Saturday free before she left. Despite having agreed to meet her alone, Matsuoka's feelings were mixed. To be honest, he was less than excited.

He felt like it wasn't right to see her in this way. *But I haven't agreed to date her or anything*, he told himself as an excuse. Besides, maybe after meeting a few more times, he would actually come to like her. Fujimoto was a little similar to the girlfriend he had been living with before falling in love with Hirose.

Whatever the case, he needed something to change his focus. Just as Hirose had forgotten about Yoko Eto and moved on, he needed something else to divert his feelings, too.

When Matsuoka woke up in the morning, the first thing he did was look at his digital calendar. August 2nd—just staring at the letters made his forehead break out into a sweat. As he was jostled along on a packed commuter train, the fishy body odour of the middle-aged office worker in front of him assaulted his nose for the entire ride. The unpleasantness was still lingering about him when he arrived at the office. Hayama approached him as soon as he had put his bag down on his desk. After a quick greeting, she jumped into the main topic.

"You two can meet this Saturday at ten in the morning in front of Shimazu Station. How does that sound?"

If Hayama had just told him Fujimoto's phone number, he could have contacted her directly and Hayama wouldn't have had to go out of her way to arrange everything. But Matsuoka figured she was just trying to be helpful, and kept his mouth shut.

That was Thursday. On Friday night, one day before the scheduled aquarium trip, Matsuoka got a phone call from Hayama.

"I'm wondering if it's alright if I come along with you two tomorrow," she said. Hayama's tone was guilt-ridden and she seemed sorry that she even had to bring this topic up. "At first, Mako said she was alright with meeting you alone, but suddenly today she said she wasn't really keen on it. And she's being really stubborn about it."

Matsuoka smile wryly. He and Fujimoto had met and talked once already, yet she was still unwilling to be alone with him. She was timid to the point of being absurd.

"I told her off about it, too, that it would be an insult to you," Hayama continued. "But she told me she just can't do it. So, I hope you'll let me tag along in the back. I'm sorry. I'll leave partway if Mako seems fine by herself."

Matsuoka ended up agreeing to the chaperoned date. He could tell Hayama was looking out for both of them as their mediator, and he didn't want her efforts going to waste.

The next day, Matsuoka arrived ten minutes early at their meeting spot in front of the station. Since he wasn't allowed to park his car there, he took it to the parking garage instead, though he knew he would be back to retrieve it shortly. The sky was blue, and the sun's rays beat down fiercely. Matsuoka slipped into a shady spot in front of a vending machine and wiped his clouded glasses. He didn't wear his fake glasses at work, but since today was a date, he made an effort to look nice like he did last time. He wasn't expecting anything. He scoffed inwardly at himself for trying so hard for a date that was a mere obligation.

Fujimoto showed up accompanied by Hayama, five minutes past their meeting time. This time, Fujimoto was wearing a Shirred top and a skirt that came down below her knees instead of jeans. She was also fully made up, which brought out her feminine features. Hayama was also wearing a simple and cute navy one-piece dress.

"Hi, again. I had a great time the other day," Matsuoka said to Fujimoto's slightly lowered face.

"Hi," she replied in a barely-audible mumble.

"Can you two wait here? I'll bring the car around," Matsuoka said as he made for the parking garage.

"Oh, wait," Hayama stopped him. "We have one more coming."

Matsuoka had a bad feeling. "Who?" he asked. He didn't even have to wait for an answer, for a voice spoke up behind him.

"Um," it said, "I'm sorry I'm late. I missed my stop."

Matsuoka turned around to see Hirosue. The man wore a faded shirt and an equally worn-out pair of cotton pants. The stubborn cowlick on the back of his head was visible even from the front, and stuck straight up like a horn.

"I invited Hirosue along, too. I thought one more person wouldn't make a difference."

With his back to Hayama's words, Matsuoka fixed Hirosue with a withering glare. The man shifted his gaze uncomfortably. Matsuoka had a load of things he wanted to say, but he wasn't about to voice them here.

He bit his bottom lip hard. If he knew Hirosue had been coming, he would have lied that his parents were in the hospital so he didn't have to come. He would have avoided coming at all costs.

"Matsuoka?" Hayama's voice brought him back to reality.

"So I'll get the car, then." Matsuoka started walking briskly. For the entire time while he pulled out of the parking lot, right up to the moment he pulled up in front of the station where the other three were waiting, Matsuoka was quite seriously considering going straight home instead.

Since their outing was still considered a date, at least in name, one normally expected the pairs to sit together in the car. However, Hirosue was the one who dominated the passenger seat beside Matsuoka.

"I think I'd be too nervous to talk if we sat beside each other," Fujimoto had said, and the two women ended up sitting in the back seat together.

Their conversation carried on nicely; they were familiar with each other since they had met before, and both Hayama and Matsuoka made an effort to keep the conversation going. Hirosue, however, did not participate in their chatter unless Hayama directed the topic at him. At first, Matsuoka simply assumed the man didn't feel like talking because of him. But the sight of the man's tense expression, his bowed head, and his refusal to look at the road reminded Matsuoka that Hirosue had mentioned being unable to drive ever since causing an accident a long time ago. As if to back up Matsuoka's hypothesis Hirosue's face turned from white to bluish once they merged onto the highway.

"Can we take a break?" Matsuoka said, and pulled into a parking lot a short distance from the highway ramp. Hayama and Fujimoto went to the restrooms together, and Hirosue tumbled out of the car and slumped weakly onto a bench in the shade.

The cicadas hummed over their heads as Matsuoka approached the man. Hirosue slowly lifted his head.

"Why didn't you say no to coming?" Matsuoka asked.

Hirosue only responded with silence to his blaming tone.

"Hayama told you I was coming when she invited you, right? Didn't I say this to you already

before? Use your head a little if you want to avoid awkward run-ins like these.”

Hirosue pressed his trembling fingertips together near his mouth.

“I did hear that you two were going together, and that Ms. Hayama was going to go along. But this morning, I suddenly got a call from her saying she wanted me to come, too. She said if I came, it would be easier to split up into two groups. She could leave you and Ms. Fujimoto alone together without having to worry.”

Matsuoka wished he hadn’t heard the man’s answer. That way, he would have been able to keep assuming that the slumped man before him was simply insensitive.

“She begged me to and I couldn’t say no.”

Matsuoka went back to his car, leaving the man staring at the ground. He got in, leaned against the steering wheel and closed his eyes. Perhaps Hirosue had come out of consideration for him and Fujimoto, but he didn’t want that kind of attention. It only made him feel belittled. Gestures like that, which could not be credited to kindness, nor much else for that matter, were the hardest to deal with.

Hayama and Fujimoto came back after a while. Fujimoto offered a can of coffee to Matsuoka in the driver’s seat.

“Here you go,” she said.

“Thanks. I was actually pretty thirsty.” Matsuoka thanked her and accepted the can, but did not open it. He had been avoiding coffee for a while because of stomach problems. Hirosue returned soon afterwards, still looking as pale as ever. He did smile, however, as he accepted a can of coffee from Hayama.

“We’ll be heading out soon,” Matsuoka said. “Ms. Fujimoto, why don’t you ride in the front?”

Fujimoto widened her eyes in surprise in the back seat.

“It’s hard to talk when you’re sitting in the back and I’m in the front. Besides, I think Mr. Hirosue has stuff to talk about with Hayama.”

Hirosue’s mouth was half-open, looking as if he was about to say something, but no words came.

“Come sit beside me.”

Fujimoto was looking at Hayama in a plea for help.

“Go on,” Hayama encouraged, showing no signs of rescuing her.

At Matsuoka’s strong request, Fujimoto ended up sitting beside him. *I probably shouldn’t be too talkative around her type*, Matsuoka thought, and was careful to leave just enough breathing room between each utterance without letting the silence draw out for too long.

He glanced every now and then at Hirosue through the rear-view mirror. The man looked much better than when he had been sitting in the passenger seat. After about an hour on the highway, they arrived at the aquarium, which was adjacent to a small shopping mall on the seaside. The four of them started out touring the aquarium together. Partway through, Hirosue and Hayama disappeared right on cue. Fujimoto attempted to look for them, but Matsuoka assured her that it was better not to.

“It’s probably kinder to leave them alone. If we need to get in touch, we can always call their cells,” he said, and they continued through the aquarium together. When they reached the exit, Hayama and Hirosue were there, just as he had expected.

“Sorry, we got lost on the way,” they lied lamely.

It was past twelve by the time they finished taking a full tour of the aquarium. The afternoon segment of the dolphin show that Fujimoto wanted to see was scheduled to happen at one-thirty, so they decided to grab lunch while they waited. As they exited into the shopping mall, they were faced with a number of restaurants to choose from. Hayama stopped in front of an Italian-style restaurant with a stylish exterior.

"How about here?"

Matsuoka didn't care what it was, as long as it would fill his stomach.

"Yeah, sure," Hirosue said, but not very enthusiastically. *Oh yeah, he prefers Japanese food over Western food. I wonder if Hayama knows,* Matsuoka thought idly. But Hirosue did not assert himself, and the general consensus seemed to lean in favour of this restaurant.

"Oh, actually, sorry, I think I feel like eating something with rice," Matsuoka said abruptly.

"Japanese food, then?" Hayama said promptly, and pointed to the rice-bowl restaurant beside it. No one protested against it, so they all went in together.

They sat down in pairs on each side of a four-person table. Fujimoto still seemed reluctant to talk to Matsuoka, and did not say much. Matsuoka did discover, however, that she suddenly became articulate when the topic turned to dolphins.

"You know, come to think of it, you *are* pretty good-looking, aren't you, Matsuoka?" Hayama murmured out of the blue during a lapse in their conversation.

"What's this, all of a sudden?" Matsuoka said as he laughed and hunched his shoulders.

"I already knew you were good-looking, but it really hit home when we met up at the station. When I saw you, I wondered how you could make a plain black T-shirt and jeans look so put-together. And that ring and necklace—are those Chrome-something? That brand?"

"No, no. No way," Matsuoka said quickly. "I would never buy something that expensive. I bought these at a stall in front of the station. You know, since I got a new haircut. I thought these kinds of accessories might go well with it."

He glanced at Hirosue, but the man's gaze was lowered vacantly and he did not seem to be listening. Matsuoka was constantly conscious of the man across from him, but Hirosue did not seem as attentive. Matsuoka definitely did sense throughout that the man wasn't enjoying himself. He felt instantly depressed when he wondered if it might be because of him.

When walking in public, Hirosue would stay close to Hayama, but would not hold her hand. But when he had walked with Matsuoka, the man had eagerly held hands with him. After feeling a brief rush of meaningless superiority, Matsuoka arrived at the thought that perhaps Hirosue was just avoiding holding hands so Matsuoka wouldn't feel hurt. He plunged back into feeling pathetic again.

The dolphin show started in the afternoon. Fujimoto watched with glowing eyes, but Matsuoka was barely paying attention. The seats around the pool were crowded with families, and there wasn't enough space for the four to sit together. They split up into pairs instead, and Hayama and Hirosue sat down in the two seats in front of them. Instead of the dolphins, Matsuoka was busy staring at the back of the man's head, with its unfashionable haircut and untamed hair.

After the show, the group looked around the aquarium gift shop. Matsuoka walked around with Fujimoto, and bought her a dolphin-shaped cell phone charm. It was only expected of him, Matsuoka thought, but Fujimoto overreacted with such an apologetic attitude that he was a little taken

aback.

The two of them finished their shopping and went to see what the other pair was doing. Hayama and Hirosue were still looking at the merchandise. Hayama was looking unsure about a ballpoint pen with a dolphin charm that she was holding.

"It's kind of childish, isn't it?" she said in the end, and put it back. *Hirosue should buy it for her*, Matsuoka thought, but the man standing beside him showed no signs of doing so.

Just as they were about to head home, Matsuoka turned to the group.

"Hold on a minute," he told them, and left the other three waiting in the car. He discreetly returned to the shop and bought the ballpoint pen that Hayama had been eyeing.

Fujimoto sat in the passenger seat on the way back. She finally seemed to be getting more comfortable, for she began to talk in small bursts about things other than dolphins. As Matsuoka listened to her speak, humming occasionally in response, he soon noticed it had fallen quiet behind him. He peered into the rear-view mirror. Hayama was resting her head on Hirosue's shoulder with her eyes closed.

Matsuoka felt his chest squeeze painfully. The pain even reached his fingertips. His heart trembled, and the careful balance he had maintained until now seemed to crumble away beneath his feet.

"Can we—" his voice was unnaturally loud. "Can we stop and take a break?" he said to the group before pulling into the next parking area.

"Are you alright?" asked Fujimoto, as soon as he had stopped the car.

"Yeah, I'm fine," Matsuoka answered shortly, and got out.

He went to the resting area inside the store and sat down on a chair.

"Damn it all," he muttered to himself as he drank a bottle of tea he had bought at a vending machine. There was nothing he could do about being dumped. They had balanced the books of their past, and now they had each found someone new; on the surface, it was supposed to be happily ever after. But for Matsuoka, it was all in form only. His feelings weren't keeping up with the facts.

He told himself he was perfectly fine with seeing the two together, but once he was caught off-guard, his bravado fell away all too easily. So easily, it was shameful to watch.

"Mr. Matsuoka." Matsuoka slowly lifted his head. Hirosue was standing in front of him. Hayama was nowhere nearby.

"You must be tired," the man said. "I'm sorry for making you drive the whole way. I..."

"You can't drive because of that time you ran someone over, right? I know," he said shortly.

Hirosue's face hardened. Matsuoka immediately regretted his harsh outburst.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"No," Hirosue said quietly. "I think I can manage to drive a little if I try. But I don't think I can handle the highway right away."

"It's okay. I'm not that tired. I don't mind driving, either."

He spotted Hayama behind Hirosue, coming towards them.

"Are you alright?" Hayama said. "Mako was saying you didn't look too well."

Matsuoka tried to put on a smile, but he wasn't sure how convincing it looked.

"I'm fine, I'm fine. I was just a little thirsty."

Hayama still seemed worried as she looked to Hirosue beside her.

"You have a driving license, don't you, Hirosue? Do you think you could take over the driving for Matsuoka? Mako and I have licenses, but we barely have any experience."

Hirosue dropped his gaze. "Um," he mumbled.

"Oh, no, no, don't worry about it," Matsuoka butted in. "I don't like other people driving my car. It's unsettling, you know?"

"Yeah, but," Hayama protested.

"Isn't Ms. Fujimoto alone in the car right now? I plan to head out in ten minutes or so, so you go ahead and wait in the car."

His mention of Fujimoto seemed to remind Hayama of her existence.

"See you in a bit, then," she said, and headed back to the car.

"Why don't you go back to the car, too, Mr. Hirosue?" Matsuoka suggested, but the man did not move.

"But..."

"I'd rather not have to worry about other people when I'm not feeling well, alright? Can you just leave me alone for a bit?" he said harshly. Only then did Hirosue leave his side.

After they pulled out of the parking area, everyone was rather quiet out of consideration for Matsuoka. Matsuoka found this atmosphere so suffocating that he made an active effort to carry on a conversation. There was no time for him to wallow in futility or to wish he didn't have to see the two of them in the back seat.

They arrived back at the station they had met at before five in the evening. Since they were planned to go their separate ways from here, Matsuoka pulled up to the no-parking curb.

"This is for you." Before they said goodbye, Matsuoka handed a small bag to Fujimoto in the passenger's seat. "Open it," he encouraged.

Fujimoto opened the bag. Her face lit up, and she held the ballpoint pen with the dolphin charm in her hand happily.

"It might be kind of kiddish," Matsuoka said. Fujimoto shook her head.

"I'm really happy. Thank you."

"Good for you," Hayama said, looking longingly at the pen. Matsuoka threw a glance at Hirosue, but the tactless man did not even look regretful.

Matsuoka kept smiling until he parted with the other three. Once his car was in motion and he lost sight of everyone else, the smile vanished from his face and his whole body felt weighed down with exhaustion.

He was still lethargic when he got home. Too apathetic to do anything, Matsuoka sank to the floor without even turning the air conditioner on. *I shouldn't have given that pen to Fujimoto in front of Hirosue's face.* He had inadvertently given away a glimpse of his nasty side with his subtle gesture of passive aggression. But he had not planned from the beginning to make Hayama jealous and bring down Hirosue's reputation by proving how tactless he was.

Here was a man who lacked the sensitivity even to buy something that his lover was eyeing—even something as cheap as a ballpoint pen. At first, Matsuoka had been planning to pass the pen to the man, advise him to give it to Hayama, and subtly instruct him on the basics of relationship

etiquette. But partway through, he lost the heart even to do that.

His thoughts, his actions, made him sick of himself. Left like this, he felt like he would spiral deeper into his miserable rut and ultimately end up detesting himself. He didn't want to meet Hirose anymore. He didn't even want to see the man's face.

His phone suddenly rang as he received a new message. Although he had no basis, he felt like it was Hirose—he was almost certain it was. He pounced on his cell phone. The e-mail was from Fujimoto.

'I really enjoyed myself today. Thank you.'

Matsuoka turned off his cell phone right after reading the e-mail, and left it like that for the entire night.

In the morning, he nervously turned on his cell phone. There were no signs of any new e-mails or missed calls.

Matsuoka sent an e-mail to Fujimoto the next day. He lied that he had fallen asleep right after getting home and had not noticed the e-mail. He also did not forget to write, 'Next time, let's meet with just the two of us.'

On Monday, when Matsuoka went back to work, Hayama approached him in high spirits.

"I'm sorry about Saturday. You must have been tired."

Matsuoka tried to ignore the knot in his heart.

"Don't worry about it," he said with a smile.

"Mako and I had dinner together after you dropped us off at the station. She said she had a lot of fun."

"Oh, yeah?" The news that she had enjoyed herself caused no ripples in Matsuoka's emotions, and they remained flat. He even felt frustration at how honest his heart was. Matsuoka turned around and pretended to look at the clock on the wall.

"I have to start getting ready to go on rounds," said Matsuoka, trying to wrap up the conversation.

"Mr. Hirose, you know—" Hayama began at almost the same time. Matsuoka's whole body flinched just hearing the man's name.

"What?" he asked. Hayama shook her head.

"No, it's nothing much. You're busy, aren't you?"

"I don't like to be left hanging like that. Tell me."

"It's really not that big of a deal, but," Hayama continued, "Hirose asked me a lot about you. Like about your personality, and stuff. But you two have known each other for a while, right?"

Matsuoka's palms were sweaty. His pulse quickened.

"We just say hi to each other once in a while."

"Oh," Hayama said. "Well, the thing is that Hirose doesn't talk much in general, but he seemed to be really interested in you, so I was wondering why."

The man had been asking about him. Did that mean he was at least a little interested?

"Is he really that untalkative?"

Hirosue had talked frequently when Matsuoka had dated the man as Yoko Eto. Granted, he never said much, but he was definitely not silent altogether.

"He's a quiet person," Hayama said. "He's nice, but he can be a little slow to get the hint sometimes. I like that part of him, too, but sometimes I get kind of impatient. Even now when we're dating, I don't really have a good idea of how he feels."

Hayama sighed and raked her bangs up.

"Matsuoka, do you have time this evening?"

"Tonight?"

"I want to talk to you about some stuff, including the whole thing with Mako."

I wouldn't if I were you, whispered something in his heart. Matsuoka didn't think he could watch Hayama talk about Hirosue without letting any of his own emotions interfere. He would get jealous, be hindered by ugly emotions, and he would end up hating himself like he did Saturday night. He knew he would.

"Sure. Sounds good."

It was only because Hayama had mentioned she wanted to discuss Fujimoto with him—but that was just an excuse. Hirosue had apparently shown interest in him. Matsuoka wanted to know why, and he could not resist his desire to know.

At seven in the evening, Matsuoka wrapped up his visits and met up with Hayama in front of the station. They went to a Western-style pub and drank a little while they dined.

Matsuoka had done his own share of thinking during his visits. As a result, he made a firm decision not to bring up the topic of Hirosue. He would probably never see the man again; by asking about him, he was only hurting himself. Contrary to Matsuoka's internal decision, once Hayama got some drink into her system, much to Matsuoka's dismay, she began to talk about Hirosue on her own accord.

"Researchers are an odd bunch. They're just not very friendly or considerate by nature, you know? I didn't even get decent instructions on how to take over before I was being told to process receipts and invoices. They knew I wasn't used to my job yet, but they would still complain about how long I was taking. And when I finally sent out the invoices, I would get calls from headquarters, to *me*, complaining about how the costs are too high. When I first started, I used to come home every night and just cry. Hirosue was the one who came up and talked to me while I was going through all this. When I made a mistake, he even came to apologize to my boss with me, even though he had nothing to do with it. I kept thinking what a kind person he was, and before I knew it, I was in love with him."

Hayama lowered her eyes and rested her chin in her hand.

"He's just slow at picking up the hint. I liked him, so I sent signals as much as I could, but he never noticed. I was actually the one that asked him to go out with me. He was really surprised."

Matsuoka found himself relieved that Hirosue had not been the one to confess and ask her out.

"But..." Hayama murmured, then looked at Matsuoka earnestly. "What do you think from your point of view? Do you think Hirosue likes me?"

Matsuoka didn't know how to answer her.

"I'm sorry for asking you such a weird question," Hayama apologized, as if to infer from his hesitant expression. "I really love him, but sometimes I wonder how Hirosue feels."

"Did something happen to you guys?"

Hayama smiled vaguely, and looked down. "When I confessed to him, he said he wanted to think about it. He said before he wasn't in love with anyone and wasn't dating, but if he had to think about it, that means he never thought of me in that way before, right?"

With me, Matsuoka thought, *he sent so many e-mails with embarrassing love confessions*. Hirosue had been much more assertive when he had been dating him as Yoko Eto.

Matsuoka basked in a meaningless sense of superiority. It really was meaningless. He had been better-liked, better-loved—but right afterwards, reality bore down upon him. The rejection came after a promise to love him for the rest of his life. Matsuoka's feelings sank darkly the moment he remembered it, so much that he did not notice that Hayama had fallen silent across from him.

"I'm just not attractive as a woman, am I?" Hayama murmured in a tearful voice.

"What's gotten into you all of a sudden?" Amidst Matsuoka's agitation, a tear spilled from Hayama's eye.

"It's almost been two months since we started dating, and he won't even kiss me. I thought maybe it was because he was shy, but..."

Even while Hayama was crying, Matsuoka could not deny feeling joy at the knowledge that they had not kissed yet. It somehow made him feel like the man still belonged to him.

"I wish I could make him love me more. I wish he would love me a lot. I love him so much—so I want him to love me just the same. I'm sorry for crying," Hayama said as she dabbed at her eyes with her handkerchief. "I try my best, you know. On weekends, I go over to his house, clean and cook for him. I try to show him how good I am in the household, but I don't think he's caught on much."

Hayama snapped her head up in realization.

"Maybe he doesn't like bringing people into his house. But when I take care of his chores and stuff, he still says thank you. What do you think, Matsuoka? Am I being meddlesome?"

Matsuoka could only say that it depended on the person. When Matsuoka had visited Hirosue's apartment, he never even had to pour himself tea. He had never felt a conscious need to, either.

"Sorry for blabbering on about myself," Hayama said. "Yesterday, I think it was, Mako and I were talking on the phone, and we were saying how nice it would be if the four of us could go camping."

Four of us. Matsuoka gave a wry smile. "Camping together sounds nice and all, but I'd like to see Ms. Fujimoto alone soon."

"I guess you would," Hayama said, nodding slightly. "It's only natural. I want to move on from being the chaperone, too. I tell her how much of a good person you are. I said to her, 'Why don't you meet up with him alone?' but she keeps saying she's scared. I did give her a scolding. No matter how uncomfortable she is with men, it's not like you two have never met before. I told her she wasn't being very mature."

Hayama bowed her head.

"I'm sorry. Our next trip will be the last thing we do as a group. After that, I'll arrange it so that

you two can definitely meet up alone. You can count on me.”

Matsuoka could not refuse after being asked so directly. And if he refused to go camping now, he would probably seem like he was pointedly avoiding the group.

After that, he found it awkward to talk about Fujimoto. Hayama seemed to be coming down from her alcohol-induced buzz.

“Let’s get going, then. We have work tomorrow,” she said, standing from her seat.

Matsuoka secretly hoped the topic of camping would go nowhere after that and eventually fade into oblivion, but Hayama appeared serious about it. She decided on a place right away, and came back to ask Matsuoka if he was free the following Saturday.

“All the campsites are booked full because it’s the summer holidays. I thought we wouldn’t be able to get one, but my relative owns some cottages on a campsite in Oishi, and apparently there’s been a cancellation for two cottages next Saturday. I’ve made the reservation and gotten the OK from Hirosue and Mako, but what about you, Matsuoka? Do you think you can go?”

Matsuoka panicked when he heard she had made the reservation. He had no plans next weekend, but he didn’t want to go. He didn’t want to see Hirosue. But he didn’t want to tell Hayama to cancel a cottage she had worked so hard to reserve. It was partly his responsibility in the first place, anyway, for not refusing her outright at the first invitation.

“I can go,” Matsuoka ended up telling her. The moment the words escaped his mouth, he regretted it with a passion. *I don’t want to go. I don’t want to go. I don’t want to see Hirosue and Hayama being intimate in my face.*

Matsuoka considered saying no several times, but he could not bring himself to broach the topic to Hayama, who talked about camping with enthusiasm. The fact of having to go camping became a source of stress for Matsuoka, and as the date approached, his stomach began to contract painfully just at the sight of Hayama.

He considered bailing on the day of by saying something had suddenly come up, but since he was the one driving, he would be preventing the other three from going as well. In the end, he would just be causing trouble for everyone else.

The day before their camping trip, Matsuoka placed his cell phone before him and spend three hours brooding. *Now is the moment to say no*, he thought, then proceeded to let the moment pass. He had done this several times now.

His indecision circled the same place over and over like a marathon track. If he had truly rather died than go, he would have made that phone call already. That wasn’t the only source of his indecision. On one hand, he did not want to see Hirosue, but he also knew that without an opportunity like this, he would never see the man at all. He didn’t want to see Hirosue—he really didn’t, but he did want to see him a little. His heart was being contradictory. He wasn’t sure about himself anymore.

Matsuoka wondered what Hirosue thought of this situation. Did he not mind? Or had he set aside his personal feelings for the sake of his girlfriend’s friend?

He wanted to know how the man actually felt. His mounting desire to know made him pick up his phone. He came close to calling, but then asked himself what he would do once he confirmed how Hirosue felt. That made his hands stop.

If Hirosue said he was unwilling to go camping, then Matsuoka would back out of it. It was a good motivator to refuse, in his opinion.

The phone dialled Hirosue's number. Matsuoka bit down hard on his lip and closed his eyes. After seven rings, he heard someone pick up. The hammering of his heart had reached its peak when the voice answered. It wasn't Hirosue's.

"Hello?"

"Um, is this Mr. Hirosue?"

"Who is this?" It was a woman's voice.

"I'm sorry. I have the wrong number." Just as he was about to hang up, the person on the other end called his name.

"Is that you, Matsuoka?" She spoke in a familiar way. It was Hayama.

"Hirosue can't come to the phone right now. What did you want to speak to him about?"

"Um—" Faced with an unexpected situation, Matsuoka tripped over his words. "It—It's not much of a big deal. Remember how you said we were going to cook outside? I was—I was just wondering if you bought charcoal. I tried to call you once, but I didn't get through." He haphazardly threw together an excuse.

"Oh, sorry! I didn't tell you. We bought charcoal when we rented the barbecue set."

"Oh. I see." He ran out of words to say.

"Who's it from?" he heard a faraway voice asking.

"Sorry for answering your phone. It's from Matsuoka. He was asking about the charcoal for tomorrow's barbecue." After explaining to Hirosue, Hayama came back on the phone.

"Anything else you were calling about?"

"Not really."

"Are you sure? See you tomorrow, then."

Now, Matsuoka had no choice but to hang up. His cell phone clock indicated it was eleven o'clock at night. Was Hayama going to go home? Perhaps she was going to sleep over—Matsuoka stopped thinking further than that. It would only make him feel hopeless if he did.

In the end, Matsuoka was neither able to know Hirosue's true opinion nor turn down the camping trip. Morning came after a sleepless night. Soon it was time to leave home, and Matsuoka drove his car out reluctantly. The clear blue sky seemed to mock him, and the sun's rays stung painfully in his eyes.

Matsuoka headed to the front of the station to pick the other three people up. The two of them were standing side-by-side at the meeting spot. Fujimoto was there, too, but the pair caught his eye first.

"Good morning," Hayama said as she slid into the back seat. Matsuoka looked at her and wondered if she had slept with Hirosue. He promptly felt disgusted at himself for even thinking about it.

Matsuoka let his car speed on, swallowing all his ugly emotions and jealousy down deep into the pit of his black heart. Hayama was in a jovial mood, and was almost maddeningly talkative.

Matsuoka actively talked to Fujimoto in the passenger's seat so he wouldn't have to think about the other two in the back seat. The shy girl appeared to have shed some of her nervousness from last time, for their conversation carried on decently.

They passed the time in the relaxed atmosphere of the car. Matsuoka personally wished he could go home right now, and found himself strange to be able to laugh and talk like he was doing now.

After two hours or so, they arrived at the campsite. The females and males split up and went to their respective cottages. The rooms were simple and about thirteen square metres. A table and set of chairs that looked handcrafted were positioned in the middle, with two wooden beds against the left- and right-hand walls. Matsuoka put his things down on the right-hand bed, and handed the keys to Hirosue, who was standing by the table.

"I'm going to head outside." It was out of consideration for Hirosue, because it would probably be awkward for him to be alone together. But the man stopped him.

"Um—" he said. "I thought you wouldn't be coming today."

It was true that Matsuoka hadn't wanted to come, but he was offended that he had to hear this from Hirosue.

"Why?"

After a moment of silence, the man mumbled, "I just had a feeling."

Matsuoka exhaled shortly.

"I thought about saying no, but the plans were already made. I actually wanted to go alone with her instead of with the four of us, but it seems like Ms. Fujimoto isn't willing to go with me just yet."

Hirosue looked like he wanted to say something, so Matsuoka waited. No words came forth. An uncomfortable silence fell between them.

"Do you really love Ms. Fujimoto?"

The question made his whole body stiffen. Matsuoka swallowed hard.

"Well, yeah. She's pretty cute."

"I see... I guess you would."

Matsuoka walked towards the cottage door. He spoke without turning around.

"You probably hate being in the same room as me, but it's just for tonight, so bear with it," he spat before he went outside. The moment he was alone, his fingers trembled, his pulse leapt, and he was overwhelmed with some sort of emotion that nearly made him cry. He would start thinking about needless things if he kept hanging about. Matsuoka made himself busy by getting the barbecue equipment out of the car and carrying it out to the yard.

Hayama and Fujimoto came out of their cottage about ten minutes later. They gathered in the shade of a tree where the buzzing of the cicadas rained down on them. They talked for a while between the three of them, but when Hirosue showed no signs of coming out, Hayama lost her patience and went to call him.

"Looks like he fell asleep," she said in exasperation when she returned. The man came out scratching his unruly bedhead. When he saw the equipment that had been unloaded by Matsuoka, he apologized.

"I'm sorry."

Now that the four of them were here, they discussed where they should go. Hayama said she wanted to take a walk in the forest.

"I actually want to try out fishing," Matsuoka said, pretending to be interested in something he actually didn't care much about. They decided to split up into two pairs, and Hayama and Hirose went to immerse themselves in the wildlife of the forest while Matsuoka and Fujimoto fished on the river bank.

Fishing was boring, just as he had imagined, but he didn't want to look openly bored in front of Fujimoto. He felt guilty for dragging her along and didn't want to seem rude, so he pretended to enjoy himself.

Eventually Matsuoka caught a fish, and was just thinking about grilling it along with the rest of the meat on the barbecue when Fujimoto spoke.

"You're going to let it go back into the river, right?" she said as she watched the fish swimming around in the bucket. Matsuoka couldn't bring himself to say he was planning to eat it.

"Of course," he replied hastily.

Fujimoto was shy, but she was a gentle girl. Matsuoka could tell she wasn't trying to score points with him when she talked about letting the fish go. He wished he could love her, and on the other hand, he found himself wondering what Hirose was doing now.

There was a strong breeze on the river bank, and they were able to stay cool since they were fishing in the shade. Matsuoka noticed a dead leaf caught in Fujimoto's hair, and extended his hand casually to brush it off. Fujimoto flinched violently as soon as he touched her hair, and Matsuoka jerked his hand back in surprise.

"I'm sorry for scaring you. There was something in your hair." When he apologized, Fujimoto put both hands to her mouth and shook her head slightly.

"Are you scared of me?"

She didn't say no. She only looked down and curled up into a ball.

"This is our third time meeting up, isn't it? I'm wondering if we can start going out alone together soon."

There was no answer.

"I'm not sure how I feel about going with the four of us all the time." Matsuoka had meant to say it gently, but was otherwise stumped in the face of Fujimoto's silence.

Thirty minutes later, when Matsuoka was thinking it was probably high time they headed back to the cottage, Fujimoto broke her silence and finally opened her mouth.

"A long time ago—when I used to take the bus to high school, there was one time when a man behind me started breathing on my neck. He did it right up until I got off in front of the school. It was so disgusting, and I felt like throwing up. After that, I just suddenly became afraid of men. I keep telling myself it's okay, that I'm fine, but I can't... I can't help it."

"Okay," Matsuoka said softly. He didn't want to give a halfhearted consolation or say something that wasn't sincere, but that thought in turn tied his tongue and made him unable to speak at all.

After that, they barely talked as they returned to the cottage. At the edge of the yard, Hirose

and Hayama were already back and preparing food. Hirosue didn't seem to be very adept at cooking, and his movements were jerky. Once Fujimoto came back, he quickly passed the knife onto her and came over to Matsuoka, who was starting the fire for the barbecue.

"I'll help."

Matsuoka accepted his offer and let Hirosue watch the fire as he set the table. By the time dusk started falling around them, the preparations were complete and the meat was grilled, so they sat down to eat. Fujimoto had been silent when they were alone together, but she was talkative with Hayama. Matsuoka was also careful this time not to let the conversation stall.

There were heaps of things nagging at his mind—Fujimoto's traumatic incident, Hirosue's somewhat stiff smile—but since he would bring the mood down if he made a grave face or if he fell silent, he pretended to be having fun.

Matsuoka drank beer to lift his spirits and enliven himself. He was careful to keep himself under control, and he did drink less than usual. Despite that, he became intoxicated quickly and severely. Perhaps it was because he hadn't slept well last night. It wouldn't have been half as bad if he was getting sleepy, but the alcohol was actually making him feel nauseous.

"Excuse me for a bit." He stood up to go to the washroom, and his knees buckled on his first step. He couldn't stand on his feet, and he sank to the ground on the spot. Since he had been sitting all this time, he hadn't realized the alcohol had gotten around to his legs.

"Matsuoka, are you alright?" Hayama asked in concern.

His stomach churned so horribly he couldn't answer her. He felt like he would vomit if he opened his mouth.

"Can you stand?" Hirosue knelt down beside him. Matsuoka gripped the man's arm like a vice.

"Washroom. Feel sick."

Hirosue caught on supported Matsuoka on the way to the washroom inside the cottage. All the while Hirosue supported his shoulders, Matsuoka held his nausea back as if his life depended on it. As soon as he shut himself up in the washroom stall, he vomited copiously. He felt sick, so sick, that tears welled up in the edges of his eyes.

After throwing up continuously for ten or fifteen minutes, he finally calmed down. When he opened the door, he was startled to see Hirosue standing right in front of him.

"Are you alright?" The man peered into his face, and Matsuoka nodded unwittingly.

"...I drank too much," he said brusquely, and rinsed his mouth. He stared at the mirror over the sink as he talked to the man behind him. "I'm fine now."

"You look pale."

"I don't feel sick anymore. It'd be great if you could go back ahead of me and tell the other two I'm alright."

"Alright," Hirosue answered, then left the room. Matsuoka knew he should go back, too, but he was irresistibly drawn to bed.

He collapsed onto the soft springs and thought he smelled Hirosue's scent. On the bed across, he saw a familiar bag. His bed, come to think of it, had been on the right. *I have to move*, Matsuoka thought. *Just a bit... just a bit longer*, he stalled as he rubbed his face against the sheets.

When he woke up, it was pitch-black around him. He had a strong urge to urinate, but he had no idea where the light switch was. He groped blindly along what felt like a sideboard until his fingers touched something. There was a loud thud.

He heard the bed creak beside him. His surroundings brightened with a snap, and Matsuoka reflexively narrowed his eyes.

"Are you alright?" The man asked. Matsuoka raised half of his body off the bed and nodded. Beneath the sideboard, an empty ashtray lay upside-down.

"I checked to see how you were doing a few times, but I didn't wake you up because you were sleeping."

"Thanks," Matsuoka said thickly.

He got up in bed and looked at his watch. It was ten minutes past twelve midnight. He felt Hirose's gaze on him, which made him more uncomfortable by the minute. He fled into the bathroom. While he relieved himself, he went pale as he realized he had fallen fast asleep in Hirose's bed. He wondered what kind of excuse he should use, but in the end he simply admitted it was a mistake.

"Um, sorry about that. I was drunk and I slept in the wrong bed."

Hirose was sitting on the other bed and looking this way.

"We didn't decide on which bed, anyway."

He was right, now that the man mentioned it. Maybe he was being unnatural by making a big deal about it. Matsuoka took off his watch and put it on the sideboard before climbing slowly into bed. It was hard falling back asleep after waking up once. He was also preoccupied with the man beside him. Even if they weren't talking, the man's presence and his breathing was enough to make Matsuoka's whole body tense with nervousness.

"Aren't you going to shower or get changed?"

Matsuoka realized he was still wearing the clothes he wore for the barbecue. He had brought shorts and a T-shirt to sleep in, but he couldn't bother to get changed.

"It's too much work. I'll do it tomorrow."

"Then, can I turn off the light?"

"Go ahead."

Once darkness fell, a wave of stillness surrounded him. Matsuoka lay between the sheets and thought of the man sleeping in the next bed. He thought about when the man used to be madly in love with him, and the time he had forced him to have violent sex.

He tried to think of other things, but always ended up thinking of Hirose. It was no surprise if he couldn't fall in love with that girl, Fujimoto. Even now, the man caused so much of a stir in his emotions; there was no way he could think about anyone else.

He's not even all that, Matsuoka told himself. Hirose wasn't good at his work, he was clueless, and he wasn't even that good-looking. Matsuoka knew that, but he still couldn't forget him.

Every time the man rolled over, the bed creaked dully. His frequent tossing made Matsuoka wonder if the man couldn't sleep because of him.

Matsuoka slipped quietly out of bed. He turned on the light and looked around. The room key was on the table in the centre. Key in hand, he was putting on his shoes at the door when a voice

spoke from behind him.

"Where are you going?"

"Just out for a short walk. I'm taking the key. You can go ahead and sleep." With that, Matsuoka went outside. The outdoor lamps were off, but since the moon was out, Matsuoka had no difficulty walking around once his eyes got used to it.

He walked through the yard where they had barbecued and made his way to the river bank. The water, which had glittered in the sun during the day, only issued a crisp tinkling sound as it flowed in the dark.

Matsuoka sat down on a flat rock by the river's edge. He didn't know what time it was since he had forgotten his watch, but he planned to wander the area until Hirosue fell asleep.

Suddenly he heard a rustling nearby, and Matsuoka hastily got to his feet. A white dog appeared behind him. It was not wearing a collar. The dog gave Matsuoka one look before disappearing back into the bushes.

Matsuoka suddenly felt afraid of being by himself in a dark area, and went back to the parking lot near the cottage. He took out his key case from his back pocket and climbed into his car.

Matsuoka sat in the driver's seat and pushed it down in a reclining position. He turned up the volume on a late-night radio show and closed his eyes. Because of the late hour, perhaps, the deejay's topics frequently leaned into uncouth territory. Matsuoka found an odd comfort in its vapid and meaningless laughter.

Once we get back from camping, I'm going to tell Fujimoto I can't date her, Matsuoka decided. There was no way he could enter a new relationship in this state. He wished he could have realized this sooner, but regretting it now wasn't going to help. In fact, he had already known—half-known, at least—all along. He had just pretended not to notice.

He sniffed in derision. He wasn't laughing at the snappy remark on the radio. He had simply laughed along for the sake of it.

Since the volume was turned up, it was a while before Matsuoka heard it—he felt like someone was knocking at the car door. He opened his eyes. A human-shaped shadow loomed in the window.

Matsuoka lowered the volume and rolled the window down. When he saw who the shadow was, the smile froze awkwardly on his face. Hirosue looked angry as he bent to peer into the window.

"What are you doing here?" he said, his eyebrows drawing together.

"Nothing."

"You said you'd go out for 'a bit' and you never came back."

Matsuoka felt a prick in his chest as he wondered if the man had come looking for him because he was worried.

"I felt like listening to the radio. That's all." He didn't tell the truth. Hirosue lowered his face and sighed.

"I was beside myself with worry when I imagined the worst that might happen."

"What do you mean, worst?"

Hirosue closed his mouth. He could have brought up any old example, like burglars, even though they both knew there was nothing that could happen in a campsite as remote as this, in the middle of nowhere. But the man was inept at thinking on his feet.

"Thought I'd go over the edge and do something rash?" Matsuoka said sarcastically.

When the man did not answer, Matsuoka laughed at him.

"Why the hell would I? I don't even have a reason to," he snapped. He felt exhilarated to spit it out, but that only lasted for a moment.

"Because I had a feeling you..." Hirosue cut himself short for a moment. "I had a feeling you were still in love with me."

Humiliation burned Matsuoka's whole body before being replaced by rage so fierce that he felt like lunging at the man. When insensitivity got this far, it was plain insulting. His wrath, along with shame at the fact that the man was right, coiled around him.

"I'm not going to fucking kill myself just because you dumped me," he yelled. "You think quite highly of yourself, don't you? But I don't give a fuck about you anymore!"

He made the bravest face he could, but his voice still shook. Hirosue probably detected it, too. Matsuoka wished those fingers resting on the edge of the rolled-down window would hurry up and go away. If Hirosue knew that he still loved him, and if he really did care about him, he wished the man would do him a favour and leave him alone.

"When I'm talking with Ms. Hayama, the topic turns to you a lot," Hirosue mumbled, as if speaking to himself. "She says she gets along the most with you out of all the male co-workers in her cohort. And that you're good at your job, and kind, and a trustworthy person."

Similarly for Matsuoka, Hayama was a friend he got along rather well with. They would probably have continued to be friends, with no ill feelings between them, if she hadn't started dating Hirosue.

"But I don't understand you that well," Hirosue said.

They had met and eaten together many, many times. They had talked a lot, albeit through writing. Even though Matsuoka had been dressed as a woman, he had never disguised his honest opinions. As far as he was concerned, he hadn't changed a bit from before.

He remembered Hirosue's cold gaze when they parted ways. He figured he would never cross paths with this man again, but here he was, still beside him. Perhaps it was Hayama's influence. Perhaps it was because she had told Hirosue that he was a good person.

After Matsuoka confessed that he was a man, no matter how many times he told the man he loved him, no matter how much he made it show—almost to the point of excess—Hirosue's deep distrust did not disappear. But because they were Hayama's words—because Hayama had said he was kind—Hirosue had been persuaded to at least consider them. He had trusted Hayama's words over his.

"I understand you really well, Mr. Hirosue."

After a short silence, he heard a short murmur.

"You're lying."

"I'm not. But all that doesn't matter anymore."

"There's no way you can understand me. Not when you've only..."

Hirosue hesitated to say the rest, but Matsuoka finished his sentence on purpose.

"When I've only slept with you once?"

The man looked down awkwardly.

"Sure, I guess you're right," Matsuoka agreed, then took a breath. "I'm going to listen to the radio for a bit longer. I'll go back to the cottage when I feel like it."

Hirosue quickly withdrew his hand when he started rolling the window up. After it was completely closed, Matsuoka turned up the volume of the radio and shut his eyes.

A while later, when he figured it was safe, he opened his eyes. As he predicted, there was no one beside him. Matsuoka squinted into the darkness and made sure there was really no one beside him, then cried a little. He wasn't crying because he wanted to; the tears simply spilled from his eyes on their own.

Matsuoka returned to the cottage at daybreak, past six. As soon as he got back, he showered and changed his clothes. Hiro sue woke up sometime in the middle of his routine. Even when their eyes met, the man did not even wish him good morning. They whiled the time away in unnatural silence which continued until half past seven, when Hayama came knocking on their door to say that breakfast was ready.

Their conversation carried on normally once the four of them were in a group. Matsuoka didn't ignore Hiro sue, and Hiro sue answered properly if he was asked a question. After their breakfast of sandwiches and coffee, they began to prepare to go home. They got their things together, left the cottages, and were just about to check out when Matsuoka realized he had forgotten his car keys in the room.

He hurried back by himself and grabbed the keys from the table, and noticed that something else had been left behind. A single watch remained forlornly on top of the side table. It was Hiro sue's. The Japanese-made watch bore many scratch marks on its glass surface, and the leather band was caramel-coloured and well-worn.

Matsuoka slipped the watch into his pocket and left the room. Hiro sue mentioned nothing about the watch the whole time, even after Matsuoka dropped the three of them off at the station. He didn't even seem to realize he had forgotten it.

Matsuoka hadn't planned on taking the watch home from the outset. On the way home from camp, he had tried to bring it up many times, but ended up parting with the group without saying anything at all.

He thought about returning it to Hiro sue in person, but that would mean having to meet the man. He didn't want to use the watch as a reason to meet with Hiro sue when the man was aware of his feelings. He felt like the man would assume that his real purpose was to see him and not to return the watch, and he didn't want the man to get ideas.

The following day after returning from camping, Matsuoka's own watch suddenly stopped working—it was out of batteries. He wasn't inconvenienced much by the absence of his watch, since he could still check the time on his cell phone. But Matsuoka couldn't be bothered to pull his cell phone out every time he wanted to check the time, so he borrowed Hiro sue's watch instead.

When he fastened the wristband, it was one notch further in than Hiro sue's. It was an old

watch, but the clock face was large and easy to read. Nevertheless, it was far from sleek and refined, and was almost like Hirosue himself.

Matsuoka was at once surprised and appalled at himself for being able to use someone else's belonging as if it were his own, but he continued to use it. The moment he put the watch on, it settled snugly on his wrist, and he found that fact irresistibly endearing.

In the first week after returning from camping, Matsuoka met alone with Fujimoto for the first time. He felt guilty rejecting Fujimoto just when she was starting to get used to him, but he couldn't keep lying.

"I still can't forget about the person used to I love," he said truthfully. Fujimoto lowered her eyes and listened to him silently.

Finally, she asked, "Is that someone Ms. Hayama?"

"No. Why?"

"I felt like you were looking at her all the time," she said. Matsuoka didn't have the courage to say that he hadn't been looking at Hayama, but at the man beside her.

He didn't tell Hayama that things didn't work out between him and Fujimoto, but the news seemed to have gotten across through Fujimoto. Hayama stopped talking about her, and also stopped suggesting that the four of them go out. Matsuoka wondered if Hirosue knew how he and Fujimoto had ended, but he had no way of finding out.

Matsuoka could see what was to come. With no opportunities to meet up together, his memories would begin to fade away. Once he could no longer remember whose watch he was wearing on his right wrist, that was when he could say that things were truly over.

Before he knew it, August had ended. His mind knew that it was September, but the sun's scorching rays showed no signs of waning, and often deluded Matsuoka.

His sales visits occasionally took him into the shopping district, where he found it strange to see so few young people hanging about the streets. That was when he would realize that, yes, the summer holidays were over.

One Wednesday in the second week of September, Matsuoka finished his sales rounds and made a call to the office to let them know he was going straight home.

"Come back because I need to talk to you about something," he was told by his section manager. Matsuoka reluctantly took the wearisome journey on multiple trains back to the office.

It was past six o'clock. Matsuoka passed through the darkening entrance lobby and waited for an elevator. He grew irritable by the wait, and when the car finally came down, there were a lot more people on it than he had imagined—about seven or eight in number.

"Matsuoka."

Hayama was among the group. She jogged towards him. "Welcome back from your rounds. Are you finished your work now?"

Despite it being the end of the shift, Hayama's foundation was still immaculate. She was also dressed up. Matsuoka wondered if she was on her way to a date. He refused to think of whom it was with, and banished the thought from his mind.

"Almost. Is Section Manager Imoto still there?"

"He was, but he was getting ready to go home."

Matsuoka clicked his tongue irritably and subconsciously glanced at his watch. "Looks like I have to hurry, then."

"Hmm?" Hayama murmured, and peered at Matsuoka's wrist. "Did you change your watch?"

"Oh. Yeah." He let his arm hang and pulled at his sleeve with his right hand.

"I thought you used to wear a TAG Heuer."

"Um, yeah, it ran out of batteries. I haven't gotten them changed yet. This watch is my old one that I used to wear in university."

"I see," Hayama said, seeming oblivious to Matsuoka's awkward mumble. "Oh, right, speaking of which: do you remember how we went camping last month? Apparently Hirose misplaced his watch that time."

Matsuoka's heart, which was already restless as is, began to pound like an alarm bell.

"He contacted the cottage we stayed at, but they couldn't find it. He doesn't know where he lost it himself, so if it was on the campsite or near the river, we were saying it's probably as good as lost. Matsuoka, would you mind doing a quick search inside your car? Hirose said he didn't leave it there, but just in case."

"Oh. Sure," Matsuoka said in a small voice. "Was it that important of a watch?"

Hayama hunched her shoulders.

"It wasn't very expensive, but apparently it was a gift from his parents when he got his first job."

Matsuoka's right hand trembled.

"As for the watch in question, it had a gold rim and brown band... yeah, almost like the one you're wearing."

After that, Matsuoka truthfully didn't remember what he talked about with Hayama. Without even giving her a decent reply, he fled the scene. The presence around his right wrist weighed down on him unbearably.

Right after parting with Hayama, Matsuoka took off the watch and slipped it into his pocket. Once he got home, he put it on the table and stood there, stumped.

He didn't know it was such a precious thing. He knew he needed to return it, but there was no way in heaven he was going to admit that he not only took it home without permission but had also been using it daily.

He thought of passing the watch onto Hayama, saying he had found it in his car, but Hayama had already seen this watch. Wouldn't she realize that he was using it?

His thoughts went around in circles until he gradually started getting tired. He also realized that he didn't really want to give the watch back. If this was a gift from his parents, Hirose probably cherished it—that was all the more reason why he didn't want to return it.

Matsuoka clenched his hand around the watch and closed his eyes. *I'll cherish it, I promise, so please let me keep it. Please*, he begged a man who couldn't hear, and who wasn't even listening.

Suddenly, his cell phone started to ring. Matsuoka flinched. He hadn't heard this ring tone in months. Trembling, he seized his cell phone and looked at the display. It was Hirose calling. There was no mistake about it.

Matsuoka warily drew back from his cell phone, then crept up to peer at it again. He kept repeating the meaningless action until the phone abruptly stopped ringing.

What was Hirose calling about? The man hadn't contacted him once since they broke up. Matsuoka was still pondering reasons when he heard his ringtone go off at an incoming e-mail. The sender was Motofumi Hirose. Matsuoka opened the e-mail with shaking fingers.

'I would like to meet and talk with you. Could you tell me a day that you're free?'

It was a lie, Matsuoka thought. There was no way Hirose would send an e-mail with such good news for no reason. There had to be another motive to it. After a little thinking, Matsuoka was hit with a realization.

What if Hirose had been tipped off by Hayama? What if he knew that Matsuoka had taken his watch home and had been using it?

He could connect the dots easily if that was the case. Hayama had realized that the watch Matsuoka was wearing belonged to Hirose. She had bluffed him, but since he hadn't shown much of a reaction, she had talked to Hirose about it. Now, perhaps Hirose was trying to get the watch back on his own.

Matsuoka was aware that what he was doing was wrong. But still—

He took out his cell phone, and put Hirose's number on his block list. He did the same for the man's e-mail. He could deal with not being able to see Hirose, or the man falling in love with someone else. There was nothing he could do about that. In turn, the least he hoped for was that he would be permitted to keep the man's watch.

September drew to an end, taking with it the unique humidity of the summer. The sky seemed higher up. That day, Matsuoka returned to the office at seven in the evening to clear up some paperwork. He had finished his visits at five, but he had chosen specifically to return to the office at this hour. Lately, he had been coming back late on purpose quite often, and that was to avoid running into Hayama. The more time they spent in the office together, the more chances there were that she would talk to him. Matsuoka wanted to leave some distance between himself and Hayama until the affair with the watch settled down.

He looked up at his building from the outside to see that the floor that contained his department still had its lights on. The girls in administration usually left past six, so if there was anyone staying behind, it was probably someone who was also back from his sales rounds.

There were three people in the office when he came in, and one of them was Hayama. Matsuoka panicked when their eyes met. Unable to avoid her gaze, he smiled instead. He felt like Hayama's eyes were following him as he nervously sat down in his seat. His suspicions were confirmed when she came up to him without a moment to spare.

"Hey. Welcome back."

"Thanks," Matsuoka answered.

"You seem really busy lately. I barely see you at the office anymore."

"Well, yeah. I have a lot of new clients, so it's a lot of work following up. A phone call usually isn't enough to get things moving forward." He hunched his shoulders and sighed for show. But all he was doing was putting up a front, and his fingers still trembled.

"So, what're you doing here so late, Hayama?"

"I'm actually finished with my work. Today, I wanted to talk to you about something."

Matsuoka gulped loudly.

"About what?"

"Concerning Hirosue."

A wave of sweat broke out on his back. He had changed the batteries on his own watch immediately after that incident. He wasn't using Hirosue's watch anymore; it was hidden away preciously in a corner of his room.

"What about Mr. Hirosue?" Matsuoka asked, pretending to seem innocent as he started up his computer. "Oh, you mean about the watch?"

"No, nothing about that," Hayama murmured. "I actually want you to hear me out about something, Matsuoka."

Although Matsuoka's fingers were moving, his head wasn't functioning at all.

"I was wondering if you could come out for a bit with me after you finish work."

No matter how many times Matsuoka said he was tired, or that he didn't know what time he would finish, Hayama refused to back down. In the end, Matsuoka had no choice but to agree. Not even thirty minutes after turning on his computer, he turned the power off again. His work wasn't done, but he considered it done. He wasn't in a state where he could get any work done, anyway.

He was taken by Hayama into a cafe that was open late. There were many young female customers, who were perhaps there for the handsome waiters.

Even after sitting across from Hayama, Matsuoka's face remained lowered. It was past eight in the evening, a perfectly normal hour to be hungry. Lacking an appetite, however, he only ordered coffee.

Hayama had said it wasn't about the watch. The only other thing that she could want to talk to him about concerning Hirosue was that she had found out he used to date Hirosue in drag. That was all he could think of.

For a while, Hayama said nothing. Matsuoka was too busy bracing himself for the shower of abuse that it took him a while to notice her deeply pained expression. When she finally opened her mouth, what came out was talk about Okabayashi and Fukuda.

"You know how Ms. Okabayashi used to date Mr. Fukuda, from our cohort? They broke up once, but it seems like they've gotten back together."

Matsuoka tilted his head in perplexity.

"Apparently Ms. Okabayashi told Mr. Fukuda about how Hirosue and I are dating."

Matsuoka still didn't know where this conversation was going.

"It turns out Mr. Fukuda knows who Hirosue used to be in love with. I heard she was tall, like

a model, and really beautiful.”

Matsuoka swallowed hard.

“I keep telling myself that it doesn’t matter who he used to love—that I’m the one dating him now. But it doesn’t work,” Hayama said tearfully. “I’m almost sure Hirose’s still in love with her. He doesn’t care about me at all.”

Tears fell freely from her eyes now.

“You don’t know that,” Matsuoka protested reflexively.

“I’m always the one saying I want to meet. I’m always the one that says ‘I love you’. One time, I didn’t call him for a whole week. I waited and waited, wondering when he’d call, and he didn’t. I couldn’t stand waiting anymore, so I gave him a call, and he didn’t even realize he hadn’t called me.”

Hayama pressed a handkerchief to her eyes.

“If he doesn’t love me, I wish he would just say so. If he can’t see me as a girlfriend, I wish he’d tell me. If he did, I’d be able to come to terms with it, too. But if I invite him, he still comes out, and after we go out, he always says he had a good time. When that happens over and over, I can’t tell what’s real and what’s not anymore.”

Matsuoka’s feelings were mixed. The nasty side of him was relieved to hear Hayama confess she wasn’t loved; his other side felt sorry for the weeping woman.

“Have you seen Hirose’s former girlfriend before?” Hayama stared at him with watery eyes, and Matsuoka fell silent. When Hayama saw that he could not answer the simple yes-or-no question, she smiled crookedly.

“Is she that pretty?”

Matsuoka looked down.

“I guess she was. I see,” Hayama murmured, and hung her head. Teardrops fell and burst on her linked hands on the table. Matsuoka bit his lip so hard it started bleeding.

“She was pretty,” he began, “but that was all she was. She had a horrible personality. She was dating a bunch of guys at the same time and she didn’t even care. She was selfish and wanted everything her way. She had no consideration for anyone. I think Mr. Hirose was just being taken advantage of. I’m glad they broke up, actually.”

“Really?” Hayama said softly.

“Hayama, I think you’re much better than his ex-girlfriend. When guys get into those types of horrible women, it’s like the flu. They eventually get over it. I’m sure if you give it a bit more time, he’ll forget about her.”

Hayama finally seemed to be calming down, for she stopped sobbing.

“Sorry for losing my composure,” she smiled apologetically, her eyes red and wet with tears. “It was just so horrible being filled with doubt every day, and I just wanted someone to hear me out. I’m really glad I was able to talk to you today, Matsuoka.”

He and Hayama parted about half an hour later. By the time he walked Hayama to the station, her tears had disappeared. Matsuoka also boarded his train bound for home.

He thought about Hirose’s and Hayama’s unstable relationship. Hirose hadn’t forgotten about Yoko Eto—about Matsuoka in female form.

Matsuoka felt in dire need of a drink. He didn’t want to think of any of it. He bought a few

beers at the convenience of store in front of the station. While he listened to the lonely rustling of the plastic bag hanging from his hand, he wished he could get home soon to drink and fall asleep, his mind blissfully blank.

Too weary to wait for the elevator, Matsuoka walked up the stairs, but regretted it even before he had walked up five steps. He was tired from doing rounds, and his legs felt leaden, as if they were being chained down. Since Matsuoka had his head down, he did not realize someone was standing in front of his door until he was right outside his apartment.

He first felt a presence from the dark shadow that stretched to his feet. Matsuoka languidly raised his head. Though he did not give a shout, he did drop his bag in astonishment. The cans of beer rolled across the concrete. Hirosue picked up one that had rolled away from the rest.

"Hi."

Stop shaking, Matsuoka told himself sternly, but since his hand refused to stop shaking, he snatched the can from the man in a swift move. He kept his head down as he got his keys out of his bag. His fingers shook, and it took him three tries to get the key into the keyhole.

"Um..."

The man had been waiting outside his door. He had been waiting to see him. Matsuoka could see that, but he wasn't going to be nice and be the one to ask Hirosue why.

"I have to talk to you about something," said Hirosue.

His door was unlocked now. Matsuoka made sure he could easily flee inside at any moment before answering the man.

"What is it?"

"I couldn't get through to your phone—"

"Oh, yeah. I did that on purpose."

Hirosue looked down. Matsuoka balled his hand into a fist with so much strength that his thumbnail dug into his skin. "I sure don't have anything to call you about, and I figured you wouldn't, either."

The man fell silent. His clumsy right hand raked his oft-dishevelled hair.

"I wouldn't call you if I didn't have something to say," the man said. "You didn't need to block my number."

Hirosue was right. If he didn't have anything to call about, the phone would remain silent.

"I called you so many times," Hirosue said quietly. Matsuoka felt like he was being criticized.

"You could have passed a message onto Hayama if you had something to say to me."

Hirosue fell silent again. Their conversation lay stagnant at their feet with no signs of moving forward.

"I want to give back the things you gave me."

"Give back?"

"Like the gloves..."

He had chosen those gloves for Hirosue's birthday last year, thinking they would be nice for him. Matsuoka smiled bitterly. Here he was, so desirous of something Hirosue cherished that he had stolen it to make it his; on the other hand there was Hirosue, who tried to return even the gifts he had received.

"Throw it out if you don't want it," Matsuoka spat.

"I thought of it. But I can't bring myself to throw it out, so I thought the best thing would be to give everything back to you."

"What the hell do you expect me to do with it? It's just extra trouble for me."

"It's trouble for me, too."

He had looked so happy, thanking Matsuoka so many times, grinning from ear to ear. That was all a lie. Soon, Matsuoka could no longer distinguish what was a lie and what was not.

"Give it back, then," he growled in a low voice. "If you can't get rid of it yourself, if you're saying it's all just *trouble* for you, then give it back. I'll throw it away."

Matsuoka thrust his right hand out, and Hirosue stared at it.

"You brought the stuff, didn't you? Hurry up!"

As if spurred on by his voice, Hirosue hastily opened his bag. It slipped out of his hands while he was rifling through it, and Hirosue knelt to pick it up. He continued to crouch and rummage through his bag. After a while, he spoke.

"It's not here," he said stiffly. "I swear I had it in my bag all this time. I was planning to give it back to you. Maybe I left it at the office. I'll definitely bring it next time."

Matsuoka took a long breath. He tried to calm himself, but his molars chattered slightly.

"I don't want there to be a next time."

Matsuoka stared at Hirosue head-on as the man stood up.

"Get rid of the stuff. I don't care how. I'm sorry," he added sarcastically. "I know you'd rather give it back to me so you can free yourself of any guilt."

"I—" mumbled Hirosue, but Matsuoka forcefully cut him off.

"I don't want to see you again, Mr. Hirosue. I don't even want to glimpse your face, if I can help it."

When the man asked why, Matsuoka almost laughed at his insensitivity.

"I used to love you, but you dumped me. Now, you're going out with my co-worker. Do I need any more reason not to want to see you?" he said incredulously.

The man always fell silent as soon as things got awkward. It made Matsuoka even angrier because he knew the other man had nothing to argue back with.

"You think I was deceiving you all this time by crossdressing, don't you, Mr. Hirosue? That's why you're angry at me. You're right—and I'm sorry for tricking you. I regret it."

There was no response.

"So, please, by all means forget all about me," Matsuoka bowed his head in mock humbleness, then straightened up. "Stop hanging around me and pay more attention to Hayama. If you're her boyfriend, the least you can do is make sure she doesn't feel insecure."

Then, he purposefully brightened his voice to inject some enthusiasm into himself.

"She's a great person, you know. Responsible. Kind."

His compliments were honest ones, but he still felt pathetic to have to say them.

"It's late. You should get going, Mr. Hirosue. Bye."

With that, Matsuoka opened his door. At the same time, he was grabbed by the right arm. He flinched violently.

"What the hell?"

"Um—"

"Let go of me!"

When he drew back with all his might, the man's fingers fell away from him. Matsuoka seized the chance to scramble into his apartment and lock the door.

As he leaned with his back against the door, he could hear heavy pounding on it. Even if he plugged his ears and tried not to listen to it, he could still feel its vibrations on his back.

The pounding continued for a while, but soon became few and far between until he could not hear it anymore. Matsuoka sank to the floor of his doorway and bowed his head. His shaking did not stop, and the spot where he had been grabbed by the arm continued to burn.

He wondered how Hirosue must have felt when he stopped him. Did he still have something to say, or—?

A vague and fantastical expectation swelled in his heart—perhaps Hirosue was keen on him?—then, faded. At first, Hirosue had been angry that Matsuoka was tricking him in drag. He had given Matsuoka the cold shoulder no matter how much he told the man he loved him. Every time, Matsuoka had been dealt a strong and stark rejection to his face. He found it hard to believe that things could be changing for the better.

Then, why? Hirosue claimed he had come to return the things he had received but Matsuoka felt like it was an excuse to see him. He knew there was no way the man would want to see him, but nevertheless....

Matsuoka expected something in the strength of those arms, in the man's act of stopping him, in his lips that had parted to say something. His sweet expectation mingled with the bitter memories of his rejection. *There's no way it could be. But then again, could it—?* His mind switched between the thoughts endlessly.

Perhaps Hirosue's feelings had changed, but Matsuoka was far from convinced. He couldn't recall any type of constructive conversation between them that might cause the change in Hirosue. The air had soured between them plenty of times, sure, but not once did they talk about anything romantic. To top things off, Matsuoka had been busy most of the time trying to get close with Hayama's female friend.

Matsuoka refused to hold any expectations. *It's only because I love him, because I have feelings for him, that I'm interpreting everything through rose-coloured glasses*, he told himself. He remembered how he had confessed the first time with the belief that it would be alright, only to be rejected. He continued to dig out the most horrible memories he could recall.

Matsuoka sank down in the doorway and drank his beer. He drank one after another, but could not manage to get drunk. It was unpleasant, frustrating, and painful.

Matsuoka's phone did not ring. Hirosue couldn't have contacted him, anyway, since his number was blocked. On that day, Matsuoka had sent the man home at the door. He had chased the man away, saying they had nothing to talk about.

But even afterwards, Matsuoka still felt nervous coming home to his apartment. He kept

wondering if Hirosue would be waiting in front of his flat, and needed to muster courage every time he took the first step off the elevator. However, those expectations always ended disappointment, for there was never anyone at the door.

About a week after Hirosue had come to visit him, Matsuoka had lunch with Hayama. He had unluckily run into her around noon when he was coming back from his rounds and she was just about to go out to lunch.

Hayama invited him out, saying she had something to talk to him about, and they went to a cafe nearby. They ordered from the lunch menu. It was a cute little shop with an outdoor patio, but the tables were small, and the chairs were hard and uncomfortable.

"So, how's it been after that?"

Hayama tilted her head at Matsuoka's question.

"You know, with Mr. Hirosue and stuff."

"Oh, that," Hayama said, smiling. "I think it was after I talked to you, Matsuoka. Hirosue started calling me on his own. We don't say much, but he calls almost every day."

Matsuoka didn't want to admit that he was disappointed.

"We don't get to see each other often, but I don't feel too lonely because I get to hear his voice."

"Okay," Matsuoka said in a somewhat tactless reply.

"Oh, right, Hirosue and I talk about you a lot, you know."

"Huh?"

"You know, since you're our mutual friend. And I think Hirosue's very conscious about you, Matsuoka."

For a moment, he wondered if Hayama had found out about his feelings, and that was what she meant by "conscious".

"Wh-What do you mean by conscious?" he stammered.

"Like, as a man."

Conscious of him as a man—was Hirosue conscious of him as a romantic interest? Matsuoka's thoughts were so focused on himself and Hirosue that it took him a while to realize he had misunderstood.

"You know," Hayama continued, "since you're good-looking, and you're good at your job, and you're nice. Usually people think I'm just being polite, since we're in the same cohort and all, but when I told Hirosue these things, you know what he said? 'Why didn't you fall in love with Mr. Matsuoka instead?'"

Hayama giggled.

"He asked me, why didn't I fall in love with good-looking Mr. Matsuoka? 'Why do you like me,' he said, with that tone. It was almost like he was jealous. Isn't that cute? So I told him, at first I did kind of have a crush on you, but you were living with your girlfriend at the time. And as time went by, those feelings just changed to good friendship."

"You told him about my ex-girlfriend?" Matsuoka said incredulously.

"Oh, would you rather I hadn't?"

"Well, no," he said vaguely, unable to think of a reason why she shouldn't have. It was true he used to live with a girl, but he wished Hirosue hadn't heard it from Hayama's lips.

"Come to think of it, when I told him you used to date someone else, he seemed curious about what kind of girl she was. I think he's being a little too conscious, though."

Hayama laughed as she said, "I'm not really your type anyway, am I, Matsuoka?"

Lunch at the cafe was certainly pretty, but the portion sizes were modest. Perhaps it was just right for Hayama, but it was not enough for Matsuoka. Even so, he found himself being unable to eat much. And it wasn't a problem with the taste of the dish itself.

"Two days ago, I think, I went over to Hirosue's apartment," Hayama said. "I cleaned his room, then we went shopping together, and I cooked him dinner."

Hayama let out a short breath.

"And while we were shopping, I just thought—maybe this is going to be what it's like if we get married."

"You're... getting married?" Matsuoka's voice shook as he asked.

"I haven't been proposed to, or anything. I just thought it'd be nice if we could. I love Hirosue, and he's nice. Don't you think he'd make a great father?" Hayama said, before smiling and adding, "I hope you're rooting for us, Matsuoka." Matsuoka smiled back, but could not bring himself to wish her luck.

In the afternoon, Matsuoka went around to four of his regular customers. He exhausted himself by visiting extra stores he hadn't planned to visit, and so obliterated any thinking space from his mind. But on the train, while he was reading over materials, he found himself remembering Hayama saying she wanted to get married. Hirosue was also strongly inclined towards marriage. Hirosue's hopes and Hayama's fulfilled each other perfectly.

No doubt Hirosue had only come to his apartment on a whim to give those gloves back. He, Matsuoka, had been mistaken to overreact. Never did he feel more absurd about everything he had troubled his mind with, and how he had expected almost every evening for there to be someone at his door.

If Hirosue hadn't started dating Hayama, if Hayama and Matsuoka hadn't known each other, if they had not been in the same department, he wouldn't have had to find out about Hirosue's next relationship in such minute and real-time detail. He wouldn't have wanted to know, anyway.

It was past six-thirty when Matsuoka returned to the office. He could have gone straight home without coming back, but the documents were heavy to carry, and the office was on the way back from his rounds.

There was still a scattering of people staying behind. Hayama was one of them. There appeared to be some kind of problem, for she was talking with another female worker in a tense, urgent tone. Matsuoka slipped out of the room without greeting her and boarded the elevator.

Matsuoka got as far as the entrance lobby before he was stopped.

"Mr. Matsuoka," said a voice. Matsuoka flinched. A man was approaching him from the shadows of a pillar. Matsuoka's feet were rooted firmly to the ground, but he wished he could flee from the spot.

"Um—"

"Hayama's still here," Matsuoka interrupted.

The man closed his mouth.

"Want me to call her? I think she's done her work, but she was talking with someone. Why don't you ring her cell?"

"I came because I want to talk to you."

Matsuoka already supposed that the man had come to see him. He only pretended not to notice.

"Well, *I* don't have anything to say to you," Matsuoka said flatly. The man stared at his feet. Matsuoka felt his heart clench at the man's hurt expression. It was even more unbearable because he knew he was the cause of it.

"I just want a little bit of your time."

Although Matsuoka did not answer, he did feel slightly curious to know what the man would say.

The silence between them in the entrance lobby was broken by the sound of the elevator opening. When they turned around towards the noisy bustle, Hayama was there. Their eyes met. Hayama broke away from the group and came jogging up to Hirosue.

"Did you come to pick me up? You should have called me and let me know."

Hirosue's gaze wandered in agitation. Soon, Hayama's co-worker caught up to her.

"Ms. Hayama, who's that?"

"This is Mr. Hirosue. He was very good to me when I was at Koishikawa Lab," Hayama said, introducing him to everyone.

"Wait, are you two dating?" Her co-worker's question already sounded somewhat sure of the answer.

"Umm, well," Hayama dawdled for a bit, but did not keep her expectant listeners waiting for long. "I guess you could say that," she smiled quietly.

Her co-workers teased her for a bit, then perhaps out of consideration, left the building before her.

"Are you free? I feel like going out for dinner somewhere," Hayama said, clasping Hirosue's sleeve. She suddenly turned around as if to remember that Matsuoka was there.

"Oh, would you like to join us, Matsuoka?"

Matsuoka wasn't brazen enough to invite himself along.

"Don't worry about me. I'll probably just get in the way of you two, anyway."

"Not even," protested Hayama, precisely in the way he had expected. Matsuoka bid them farewell and turned on his heel. He did not look at the other man's face.

"Wait!" A voice called him from behind. He was grabbed by the arm so fiercely it hurt. "I came here today to talk to Mr. Matsuoka. So—"

Hayama's expression visibly clouded over.

"Oh. Okay." Hayama only lowered her gaze for a minute. She snapped her head back up, and smiled. "Then, do you mind if I come along? I'll make sure not to disturb you two."

Hirosue did not answer. Matsuoka glared at him to no avail, since the man was not looking at him. Matsuoka clenched his jaw. He knew this man wasn't good at thinking on his feet. But still—

"Well, I was thinking we could do it later, but I guess it wouldn't hurt to do it today," Matsuoka pretended to say to himself, in a voice that was a tad too loud for a reflection. He turned back to Hayama.

"Mr. Hirosue called me this evening saying he wanted to talk. He said he had something to ask about work. It's pretty complicated, and it might take long. We'd probably bore you to death, Hayama."

"Oh, really?" said Hayama, looking up at Hirosue. The man who couldn't lie did not even give her a nod for show.

"So, I'm really sorry about today," Matsuoka consoled her desperately.

"Oh, no. That's okay. If you guys are talking about work, that's too bad, huh. I'd probably just get in the way if I hung around." Hayama gave a shallow nod in her understanding way.

"I'm really sorry," Matsuoka repeated.

Although Hayama had given into his story, she still looked forlorn as she turned her back retreated into the distance. Matsuoka was pained to see her leave, and at the same time, infuriated by the man who simply stood there.

Matsuoka swiftly broke into a stride.

"Where are you going?" Hirosue asked in a fluster, but Matsuoka did not reply. Even after he entered the elevator and the car slowly began carrying them up, Matsuoka kept his silence.

The lights were turned off on the hallway on the fifth floor, and it was dim. Matsuoka went into a room with a sign that read, "Meeting Room No. 6." The ten-square-metre space was a meeting room in name only; it was more of a disorganized storage area for old pamphlets, old photocopiers, and product samples.

Hirosue had apparently never been in here before, for he was glancing at his surroundings curiously.

"So, what did you come to talk about?" Matsuoka's tone was terse, still carrying the remnants of his anger.

"I was wondering if we could sit down somewhere and take the time to..."

Matsuoka leaned against an old photocopier.

"I don't want you over at my place, and I don't want to go over to your place, either. I also don't want to talk about this kind of stuff in a restaurant," he said with finality. That was enough to make the man fall silent.

"Will you give me a break?" Matsuoka raked his bangs with his fingertips. "Was I really the one that had to make that excuse to Hayama?" When he glared at the man, he averted his gaze. "I'm asking you if that was really something *I* had to do. I'm always the one that has to make up excuses that don't even exist, lying about everything. You didn't even bother playing along, Mr. Hirosue," Matsuoka said, his voice rising. Finally, he felt something inside him snap.

"Fine. I understand if you don't want to lie. But you know why I had to step in and do something? It was because you wouldn't. But you don't care if some other guy like me has to lie, right, as long as it doesn't have to be you?"

"No, that's not what I—"

"That's exactly what you mean. You care only about yourself, Mr. Hirosue, and you're so busy

defending yourself, you don't give a damn about what happens to other people. As long as you're right in the end, that's all you care about."

His tears almost spilled over, so he hastily squeezed his eyes shut.

"You'll hurt people without batting an eyelash if it means you get to abide by your idea of justice. You don't even have the decency to show some tact! If I hadn't said that back there, Hayama wouldn't have been convinced. All it took was one sentence from you to make her feel better. Why can't you even say that much to her?"

He gritted his teeth—he had to, or he felt like he would really cry. After Matsuoka had hurled those words at him, Hirosue clammed up like a shell, looking miserable.

Silence wore on. Matsuoka's nerves were just as on-edge as before, but his impulse to cry had passed. He looked at his watch.

"What did you come to talk about?"

Hirosue did not raise his lowered face.

"Security is going to come around at seven-thirty, so you have twenty minutes. Hurry up and spit it out."

No words issued from Hirosue. Matsuoka wasn't going to take him by the hand like a child and encourage him to talk. At precisely seven-thirty, Matsuoka headed for the door.

"Wait!" the voice finally called him at the last minute. Matsuoka did not stop to listen. He put his hand on the doorknob before he was grabbed by the right arm.

"I can't stop thinking about you."

Matsuoka turned around. The pair of lips in front of him trembled as if trying to get the words out. The man's exhale finally formed words that reached his ears.

"Ms. Hayama tells me that even though you're good-looking, you don't show off, and that you're kind. At first, I thought you were just two-faced. But I'm starting to feel like that's not the case."

Matsuoka stared straight at Hirosue.

"You're the type to clearly speak your mind, and..." After repeating a broken string of "um"s and "ah"s as if to search for his next words, Hirosue hung his head.

"I want you to tell me why I keep thinking about you."

Matsuoka stared at the top of the man's bowed head. It finally came back up, slowly and almost fearfully.

"Is that something *I* have to think about?"

The man's hesitant eyes widened.

"Is that something I have to answer for you?" Matsuoka took a deep breath. "This is your own damn business. Think about it yourself."

Matsuoka pulled his right arm back, but the man's fingers tangled around it like chains and would not let go.

"I thought about it and I still can't figure it out, that's why—!" The man stubbornly stood his ground. "One time I couldn't fall asleep at night because I kept thinking about what you said. I thought of so many excuses to make to you, so many different ways to say it. But I could never bring myself to say it to you in person, and I had no chance..."

The heat in his fingertips dug into Matsuoka's arm.

"I don't think they're romantic feelings. But I don't know what to make of the fact that I keep thinking about you. I can't seem to place you anywhere."

Matsuoka forcefully swung his arm up. The sudden movement took the man's fingers by surprise, and they broke away from his arm.

"Not much point in talking, is there? You're gonna have to find your own answer, anyway. If you're looking to stay the same, then I don't want to hear it. I never want to see you again."

"I—"

Matsuoka violently slapped away the hand that extended towards him.

"Stop screwing around with people on your own selfish accord," he said scathingly. "You haven't forgotten that you dumped me, have you? Can you *try* to be a little considerate?"

The man looked down.

"You know, Mr. Hirosue, the moment it's about me, you just seem to turn insensitive. You think you can say anything you want and it won't hurt me a bit, huh?"

"I never—" mumbled the man in a small voice.

"You don't have any intentions to date me, do you? Not in a million chances. So just leave me alone."

He heard the clicking of shoes approaching in the hallway. Matsuoka put his hand on the doorknob.

"If you're at least a little concerned for me, do me a favour and leave me the fuck alone. Please and thank you." He bowed his head at Hirosue and opened the door. The security guard, who had reached the door by now, looked at him apprehensively. Matsuoka smiled at him. "Thank you for your hard work. I was looking for some materials, but I couldn't find them. I'll be heading home now."

"Have a good evening," the security guard murmured, and said the same thing to Hirosue, who had come out of the room after him.

Neither of them spoke as they rode the elevator together. When they reached the darkened entrance lobby, Matsuoka stopped in front of a pillar.

"Go ahead," he said, pointing to the automatic door. "I'll leave about five minutes later."

"But we both take the same way to the station," Hirosue mumbled quietly. When insensitivity went this far, it was almost laughable.

"I'd rather be alone," Matsuoka said shortly. Hirosue finally seemed to understand when it had been put into words, and left before him. As soon as the man's retreating back disappeared out of sight, Matsuoka squatted down in the shadow of the pillar.

His sigh trembled as it passed his lips. Regret coiled inside him. Hirosue had been interested in him. Perhaps he could have tried to plant a seed in the man's subconscious by insinuating that his interest was actually romantic. He inwardly shook his head at the possibility. He could manipulate the man's subconscious all he liked, but lies were doomed to lead to ruin. In the end, Hirosue was bound to say he couldn't accept men after all.

Matsuoka let out a long, thin exhale. It was going to be a while before he could salvage his spirits and recover enough to walk on his two feet.

It was close to nine o'clock when Matsuoka reached the station entrance. In the end, he had sat curled up on the spot for about one hour, and the security guard on patrol had thought he was ill.

Matsuoka dragged his heavy feet through the ticket gates and descended the stairs. The number of trains decreased dramatically after nine o'clock. Matsuoka peered at the train schedule. The train had just passed through the station, and he would have to wait about fifteen minutes for the next one.

Matsuoka sank onto a white bench against the wall. Across from him, someone was sitting in the same manner.

He recognized those clothes and their colours. When Matsuoka realized who it was, he looked at the ground. Even after the train arrived at and departed from the platform across, the sitting figure did not budge.

The train arrived on Matsuoka's side as well. He felt torn because of the man staring in his direction from the platform across. Ultimately, his indecision kept him from getting on the train.

Matsuoka repeated this twice. On the third time, he finally boarded his train. He stepped onto the car, being careful not to look at the man on the platform across, and turned his back so he would disappear from view.

The man had been waiting for him. Matsuoka had no idea what had gone through the man's head as he missed train after train until Matsuoka arrived, and did he want to interpret the man's actions too favourably.

The next day, Matsuoka didn't finish work until late, at about nine o'clock at night. He briskly jogged down the stairs to the train platform. He knew the train was coming in less than a minute.

Matsuoka continued to walk for a little after descending on the platform. If he boarded the train at the back, it was more convenient for him when he got off at the station close to his apartment.

Since this was a business district, the flow of people died out quickly at night. Matsuoka's footsteps echoed busily as he walked down the platform. He could see an office worker on the platform across, similarly wearing a suit. His heart jumped when he realized it looked like a certain someone. When he realized that he didn't just look like that person—that the man was actually him—Matsuoka's feet stopped.

They were perhaps not even ten metres apart, with the tracks between them.

The train pulled in on time, and Matsuoka boarded it. Hirosue was looking steadily at him. His figure grew smaller in the train window, then disappeared. Matsuoka's restlessness did not subside even after the man was far away and out of sight. His mind kept flashing back on its own, causing an unsettling stir in his heart.

It was no coincidence that he had seen Hirosue at the station platform. The next day and the following day, Hirosue was on opposite the platform when Matsuoka boarded his train. But all the man did was stare at him without saying anything.

Sometimes, Matsuoka did not see Hirosue at the platform—that was when Matsuoka finished work early. It didn't take much imagination to deduce that if Hirosue was coming here after finishing work at Koishikawa Laboratory, it would take him quite a bit of time to arrive.

That day, Matsuoka went home once after work, but couldn't stop wondering how late Hirose would wait for him. He changed back into his suit, fully aware that he was being idiotic. He boarded the bus that took him near his office and went down to the station platform.

He put on a cool face, and with the man's usual gaze in his peripheral vision, Matsuoka boarded the train. As he held onto the railing as the train car rattled along, Matsuoka berated himself for his stupidity.

How long are you planning to do this for? Matsuoka interrogated himself. Hirose did not approach him because he couldn't—because he hadn't arrived at an answer. How long would he have to put up with the other man's indecision? Matsuoka had a feeling that the root of the problem lay with the fact that he couldn't cut the man loose, rather than a question of putting up with him or not. But there was nothing he could do about his feelings.

In the evening, Matsuoka returned from his sales visits before four, and was currently in front of his computer, putting together the documents he had to submit.

When the end of the work day rolled around, a few girls in administration began packing up right away.

"How about dinner with us, Ms. Hayama?" a co-worker was inviting her.

"I still have some work to finish," Hayama refused with a smile. Matsuoka didn't mean to stare at her, but their eyes ended up meeting. He looked away so as not to seem unnatural. Thirty minutes later, there were only three or four workers left in the office.

"Are you almost done?" said a voice from behind. Matsuoka stopped typing.

"Yeah. How about you?"

"Mine wasn't urgent, anyway," Hayama said, shrugging. "It was an excuse to turn down dinner. She was probably trying to be nice, but..."

Hayama peered at Matsuoka's face. "Have you met with Hirose lately?"

Matsuoka swallowed. "No."

"Oh," said Hayama with a sigh, then sat down in the chair beside Matsuoka's.

"Hirose and I broke up."

Matsuoka's breath caught in his throat.

"Well, more like he dumped me."

"—When was this?"

"A couple weeks ago, I think," Hayama said, cocking her head. A couple weeks ago was right after Matsuoka and Hirose had talked in the meeting room.

"I had a feeling I was going to get dumped, so I wasn't too shocked. I did cry the whole night, though."

"Are you okay with that?"

"I don't really have a choice, do I? He dumped me. He told me why, though, so I don't have any regrets."

Hayama raked her hair back.

"He says he can't forget about the person he used to love. He said she was beautiful and gentle,

but she was also very strict. She wasn't afraid to point out his complexes, things he felt unconfident about, which he said made him really feel down sometimes. But he also said it gave him a chance to reflect on himself."

Hayama sighed. "It's hard. I guess just loving him wasn't enough. But I still think—if I'd had a bit more time, if I'd been able to get an idea of what kind of person he was—maybe I'm just making excuses."

Hayama's cell phone rang. It seemed to be an invite from her colleagues who had gone out for dinner. Hayama smiled wryly as she apologized repeatedly that she could not go.

Hayama hung up her phone and left the office soon afterwards. Matsuoka remained sitting in front of his computer, but when he saw he was getting nowhere, he left it unfinished and turned his computer off.

On the way to the station from the office, Matsuoka thought of nothing but Hirose. He pondered the meaning behind the man simply watching him go home from the station platform. He pondered the meaning behind the man not speaking to him.

He stopped at the station entrance. After some moments of hesitation, he walked right past it. Still dragging indecision and anxiety behind him, he walked over to the next station. Of course, Hirose was not on the platform there.

Perhaps he was purposely avoiding Hirose because he felt guilty about Hayama, or because he was irritated at Hirose for being indecisive, or because he himself had no idea how to act—it all jumbled up on his mind, and even Matsuoka could not make sense of it.

He didn't know why, but he simply did not feel like seeing Hirose's face today. He knew he would end up making the man wait, but he shook it off and tried not to think about it.

Even though he had taken the trouble not to see the man on his way home, he still thought about Hirose. He felt sorry for the man if he was still waiting for him, but told himself that it wasn't really any of his business what Hirose did on his own volition.

Matsuoka grew more and more restless as time passed. He tried watching TV or reading magazines, but he couldn't focus.

"He's not stupid enough to wait until the trains aren't running, is he," he muttered to himself, but could not help but feel that perhaps he was.

Matsuoka thought about calling the man on his cell phone, but it felt strange to tell the man he had gone home when it was just something Hirose was doing on his own.

It was now fifteen minutes past eleven. Matsuoka pulled out a fresh collared shirt instead of the one he had thrown in the washing machine and shrugged into the blazer he had put on the hanger. If he left now, he could still make the last train back into town.

He took his briefcase in hand, purely for show, and left the house. He ran down the nighttime street, which was dimly lit by streetlamps. He drew up close to the station at the worst timing possible, for the bells at the railway crossing began ringing as the barriers came down. The ticket gates were on the other side of the railway crossing. Matsuoka stamped on the spot irritably. The tracks rattled and the blast of wind made his bangs fly up as he waited for the long, long line of cars to pass.

The train finally passed, taking its rumbling with it. When his line of vision finally cleared, a person was standing on the other side. He had not been there before the train passed. Even after the

barriers had risen slowly, Matsuoka could not break into a walk. It was the same for the man on the other side of the railway crossing.

For a while, the both of them simply stood there. Hirosue was the one to start moving first, and he slowly stepped over the crossing.

"Good evening," he said.

"Evening," Matsuoka said quietly.

"Where are you heading to?"

He couldn't answer the man's question.

"What're you doing here yourself, Mr. Hirosue?" he asked the man instead, to disguise his lack of an answer. The man's mouth was half-open, and his gaze flitted downwards.

"I didn't see you at the station, so I got worried."

"Worried?"

"There was never a day when I couldn't see you. I went back to the office, but all the lights were off. I wondered if something had happened."

Hirosue had only seen him every day without fail because Matsuoka had gone through the station on purpose, making sure he was visible each time. But Hirosue didn't seem to have a clue about it.

"This whole time, I've been thinking of what you said to me," the man continued, "and what it is that I really want to do. But I couldn't seem to come up with an answer, so I would just watch you go home every evening while I thought. Today," he said, "when you didn't come, I didn't know why you weren't coming. I started getting worried. I thought you might have gotten into an accident or something."

The clumsy man spoke haltingly.

"Everything you say and do has a huge influence on me. No one makes me hate myself more than you do. I don't know if that's good or bad, and I don't know if it's romantic or not. But I want you to give me a chance to make sure."

Matsuoka smiled with only his lips.

"And what are you gonna do once you give it a try and it doesn't work out after all? You gonna pretend it never happened?"

"No," the man protested hastily.

"Yes," Matsuoka shot back. "You said so yourself—you're not even sure."

"I think I do love you. But I'm not confident about my feelings. I've never fallen in love with a man before. That's why I was wondering if you could help—"

"Bullshit," Matsuoka snapped. "Don't depend on people to do everything for you. Do you think I have the power to change you? How? In the end, you're the one that's going to decide."

Hirosue grew pale under the dim streetlights.

"I've had it," Matsuoka spat, and turned on his heel. Jerky footsteps came chasing after him.

"I'm sorry—"

Matsuoka did not answer.

"I'm sorry, I'm really—"

Matsuoka inwardly sealed his ears. Now, he couldn't hear anyone's voice.

"Ah!"

He turned reflexively at the shout. The pitiful man had tripped and fallen on his face. Matsuoka almost ran up to him, but thought better of it, and set his jaw instead. He thought about leaving, but no matter how long he waited, the man showed no signs of getting up. Matsuoka started getting worried. He wondered if Hirosue had struck himself somewhere and was seriously injured. Matsuoka picked up the man's bag, which had been flung a distance away, and approached him.

"Hey. You alright?"

Finally, the man slowly raised his head. He stood up, and took the proffered bag from Matsuoka, grabbing his right hand at the same time.

Matsuoka pulled back, but the arm that clenched his came along with it. They pulled at each other like a game of tug-of-war.

"I landed on my knees because I couldn't catch myself with my hands. I couldn't fall very well," Hirosue mumbled. "I had a feeling that if I fell, you'd come back for me."

Matsuoka glared at him.

"Don't tell me you did it on purpose—"

"I'm starting to understand a little more what kind of person you are, Mr. Matsuoka."

His left hand touched Matsuoka's cheek. Matsuoka's whole body flinched.

"So, please, give me a little more time—until I can sort out my own feelings. Until I can say properly that I love you."

Matsuoka looked down and fell silent. When he tried to move his right hand, it was forcefully pulled away, and he couldn't even bring it to his face. He pressed his left hand to his eyes instead.

He didn't want to cry in front of Hirosue. He didn't want to act effeminate, but the tears spilled on their own. He couldn't run or disguise himself now. His trembling body and sobbing breaths probably gave him away.

His composure crumbled along with his falling tears. The precarious hold on himself was becoming weaker and more fragile. He felt like he would collapse any minute.

"I'm begging you..." Matsuoka's voice trembled. "Don't take advantage of the fact that I love you, Mr. Hirosue."

The barrier at the railway crossing came down, and the train rattled as it passed by. *I'm sorry*—Hirosue's apology was drowned out by the noise.

Tell me that you love me soon—Matsuoka prayed to the right hand that tightly clasped his. *Tell me you love me, so much that no one else catches your eye. Rescue me from these feelings.*

The clueless man was oblivious to his thoughts and said nothing back. As Matsuoka sat curled up, his shoulders shaking, Hirosue only stroked Matsuoka's back with a hesitant hand and a look of concern on his features.